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BARGAIN IN SOULS by E. de Lancey Pierson

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A BARGAIN IN SOULS

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A Bargain in Souls

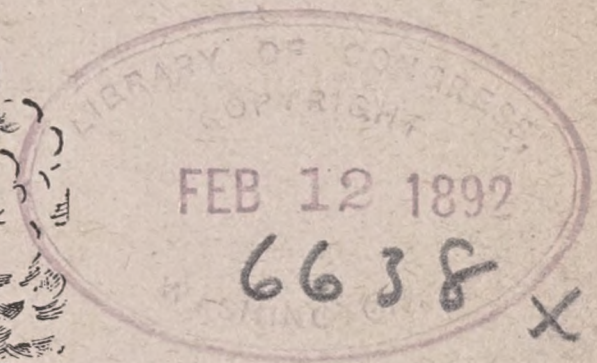
AN IMPOSSIBLE STORY

BY

ERNEST DE LANCEY ✓ PIERSON

AUTHOR OF

"A Slave of Circumstances," &c.



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To

The newly married young people
of America

This lesson in conjugal content
is addressed and inscribed

By THE AUTHOR.

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I

A DIVIDED HOUSE

"There it goes again," cried the young man, dashing down his pen angrily. "How is it possible to read or write or think in such a neighborhood? This comes of living with a church on one side, and a concert-saloon directly opposite."

Through the open window drifted the music of an organ, and subdued voices singing a hymn :

"There's a land that is fairer than day,
And by grace we can see it afar."

Then a terrible piano across the way routed the church choir, while a dozen beery voices roared out the refrain,

“For we’ve both been there before;
Many a time, many a time,”

accompanied by the banging of beer glasses and the shouts of the waiters.

“I’ll complain about that concert-saloon to-morrow to the police,” muttered the young man, walking up and down the room with a scowl on his face. “A hymn is all very well in its place, but I prefer mine unadulterated with Bowery songs. I believe the proprietor of that den across the way has a private grudge against me because I once wrote him up in the ‘Evening Owl,’ and he takes every opportunity to worry me. I never sit down with Nita for a chat of an evening but that monster at the piano begins to howl, ‘Pull down the blinds,’ or some other vulgarly suggestive song; and when we had a little difference of opinion the other night, he roared for an hour,

“‘Is marriage a failure?
Oh, yes, it’s a failure,’”

until Nita actually accused me of having hired the wretch to worry her. But, by the

way, where is Nita?"—looking at his watch. "Ten o'clock, and no signs of her yet! For a young lady who complains that she never has any liberty, this is doing pretty well. I only wish I could afford to lead such an idle, luxurious life; but that's the penalty of being a husband—a married martyr!"

Just then the slamming of the street-door sounded, and the rustle of a woman's dress was heard in the hall. A young lady in evening costume pushed aside the portiere and entered the drawing-room.

"Ah, you have come home, Arthur," throwing off her opera-cloak with a careless gesture, and sinking down in a corner of the sofa wearily.

"I have been home all the evening," he said, severely, "but I have not had the pleasure of seeing you since breakfast. I cannot for the life of me see the use of keeping up an expensive home, since you are never in it; we might better take cheap lodgings and save the rent."

"You are in a very disagreeable mood,

Arthur," pushing back a wisp of gold-brown hair from her forehead with an impatient gesture. "You know very well I had work to-day at the convention."

"Work," he echoed. "You call it work to gossip and waste your time with a crowd of snuffy old women, who fill your head with ideas how to make home unhappy. Do you think it proper for a young married woman to be wandering about the city alone at this time of the night?"

"I was not alone! Mr. Moggridge, the secretary of the Female Freedom Society, accompanied me as far as the door."

"As if that creature counted! He found out that he was a failure as a man, so now he tacks himself to the opposite sex as a champion of woman. I pity any cause that has such an advocate!" He stood, twisting his mustache with his long, white fingers, as if he would like to say more, but hesitated. "It is just like this, Nita," he said, at length: "you will certainly get talked about if you insist on roaming about the city at night in

this unconventional fashion. The line must be drawn somewhere. There are certain social laws that a married woman is bound to respect. If you had no intention of obeying them, well! you should never have married. I allow you all the liberty I can, in justice to myself; but now that you have taken the law in your own hands and go out of an evening alone, without even a word to me, I most seriously object. I don't want to speak unkindly, but for your own sake, as well as mine, it must stop right here."

"Really?" said Mrs. Vaness, raising her delicately pencilled eyebrows, while a frown contracted her smooth forehead. "I suppose I must now listen to an eloquent harangue on wifely duty. For what we are about to receive, may the Lord make us truly thankful! Do I ask embarrassing questions when you come home late, with an aromatic odor on your breath? You say you have been to the club, and I have no reason to disbelieve you. Well, I have my club, too, and one where they do not smoke or

drink, or abuse their neighbors! Would you have me sit here all the evening alone, or entertain some of your stupid friends? I don't see why I should not be allowed to amuse myself in my own quiet way, since you are absent most of the time. Arthur, you ought to have lived in the middle ages, when you would have been free to shut your wife up in a tall tower, with a slave and a lute."

She relapsed into silence, pulling at the fringe on her dress with nervous fingers.

"I don't know what to make of you, Nita," he said, thoroughly irritated. "You have certainly every reason to be contented with life—a happy home, all the comforts, and every reasonable enjoyment. Surely when I took you away from Cozzen's Corners, where a church fair was considered a great social event, you had not imbibed such strange ideas regarding a wife's liberty."

"I was a child then," she said, bitterly; "I am a woman now. I have ambitions that you should aid me to gratify. How can

I be contented to make rag carpets and embroider slippers, when my soul is struggling to soar above the crowd? I am tired of being a nobody; I want to rise, to be famous."

"That's all very well," said the husband, drily; "but do you go the right way about it? Take care that you don't fall before you are half-way up. You don't seem to understand that you must pay some deference to the conventional laws of society. Now you are a woman—"

"I am not liable to forget the fact as long as you are here to remind me," broke in the wife, impetuously; "and it is because I am a woman that you want me to go about with a ball and chain for the rest of my days. That's the life a model wife ought to lead, in your opinion, wearing a wedding ring as a badge of servility. I wonder you did not think of engaging a housekeeper. You will find many who advertise in your own paper. It would be much less expense, and you could arrange her coming and going to

suit your lordly will. I ruin my complexion superintending the cooking of your meals, and shout myself hoarse ordering your servants about, while you are idling in hotels or playing cards at the club; and yet you think I am allowed too much liberty! Liberty, indeed! Why, the serfs of the feudal ages enjoyed more privileges than the wife of to-day;" and she uttered a plaintive sob, and hid her face in a tiny lace handkerchief.

Arthur Vaness looked at the crinkled heap of silk on the sofa, and was undecided whether to laugh or wait until the storm had subsided and her pretty face was again smooth and composed. He had become accustomed of late to these local squalls, and knew that just now his wife was tired and irritated. After all, it was the best policy to remain calm, and attempt to pacify her.

"I had no idea your life was such a burden," he said gently, as he seated himself by her side and began smoothing her hair softly with his fingers. "If you are so overworked, I must see about getting another servant;

but surely the care of a little house like this, and only two people—”

“You look at everything from a man’s standpoint,” drying her eyes and brushing away his hand impatiently. “If you were not so wrapped up in your own personal pleasures, you would see that the work here is never finished. But as you are away enjoying yourself most of the time—”

“My dear, you seem to forget that I have my editorial duties on ‘The Evening Owl.’ ”

“As if any one would think of calling that work! Haven’t I seen you day after day getting that paper ready? Why, it’s nothing but amusement to edit an evening journal. You go down to the office, and smoke and gossip and read the papers. You have a secretary to answer all your correspondence, and thirty or forty men to do all the work and supply all the ideas, while you get the credit for the brains. I don’t see how you spend a whole day over that. It seems to me I could accomplish as much in an hour or two—and I am only a woman!” with bitter emphasis.

“Under the pretense of gathering news and meeting politicians you frequent the hotels and cafés every afternoon, imbibing more views of mixed drinks and free lunches than you do of the affairs of the country. No wonder that the daily papers savor of the bar-room and are unfit for a woman to read. Nothing but a muddle of divorce suits, murders and prize-fights. I should like to have the direction of a newspaper if only for a week just to show the public what a woman could do. It would be a journal with a noble aim where every article was not impregnated with an odor of cloves and free-lunch.”

Vaness laughed in the most provoking manner. “If it was not such an expensive experiment I should just like to have you take my place for a time” with a twinkle in his eye. “A week I think would be quite enough both for you and the subscribers.”

“Indeed!” with an indignant little sniff, “I suppose because I have the misfortune to be a woman you think I would fail. That hateful name to you is synonymous with

defeat in any enterprise. Never mind, we shall have the last laugh. Our day of emancipation has been long delayed, but the government which freed the black slaves will some day free the white. Then you will be forced to treat us on an equal footing, to acknowledge our rights and the justice and equity of our demands. Then we can prove the superiority of our minds over yours."

"Bravo!" cried Vaness, applauding loudly, "I had no idea that you were such a profound little orator. These brilliant ideas you must have gathered at your Convention of Cranks, where they fill your little head full of nonsense, and teach you the fine art of being miserable and discontented, and making everybody else around you the same. Well, when is this millennium to dawn, and what profession have you chosen with which to startle a waiting world?"

"I intend to be a journalist," said Nita, placidly. "There is no other profession that has fallen into such disrepute. It will be my work to revolutionize and purify it. I

have already compiled a little book of notes to direct me when the opportunity arrives. It will be the work of many years to cleanse the journalistic shambles where truth and justice have been ignominiously slain, but I have the heart and courage for the task."

"Indeed!" said Vaness, eyeing the slight and shapely figure of his wife a little dubiously. "Well, I'm sure I've no objection—not the slightest."

"Oh, I don't suppose I could ever convince you that I was capable of accomplishing any really great work!" with an angry flush on her cheek. "It is your business to scoff at a woman's ambitions, and sneer at her projects. When you are forced to acknowledge us as your equals, if not superiors, in intellect, there will be a marked change in your demeanor. When you have been relegated to a back seat in the affairs of life, you will understand what burdens we have been compelled to bear, these many centuries of slavery. Your success has been in denying us power; in keeping us in subjection; and

in your heart of hearts you dread the day when the eyes of woman shall be opened, and instead of being ruled she shall rule."

"Oh, let's go to bed!" said Vaness, with difficulty suppressing a yawn.

"I have no doubt the subject is unpleasant to you," murmured Nita, with a pathetic little sob, quite exhausted by her eloquence.

"My dear, another time I shall be glad to listen to you. But the hour is late," looking at his watch. "I am very tired, and as I must arrange the Sunday supplement tomorrow, I want to get a good night's sleep.

"If you had any confidence in me at all," she pouted, "you would let me help you. I'm sure I could get up a very interesting paper, and it wouldn't be filled with nasty politics."

"Those nasty politics are what makes a journal sell," he said, good naturedly.

"Well, why don't you try to educate them up to liking something better. Even pigs can be taught to play cards and tell the time of day. Why don't you try to lift your

readers' heads above the trough, instead of wallowing with them. What is the press for unless it can elevate the masses? Cultivate in them a taste for higher things."

"What! and lose all my subscription list in the meantime? I should be elevating the readers and flooring myself. My dear, you are a very charming little woman, and in most matters a very sensible little head; but just now you are talking about something of which you are profoundly ignorant."

"And you are quite satisfied to keep me in the dark on that as well as many other subjects. Well, never mind, I am content to wait for the day when I can learn for myself."

"And until that day arrives, let us postpone the conversation," said Arthur. "What was that?" as a terrible thud shook the ceiling above, and set all the lustres tinkling.

"You ought to be accustomed to the sound by this time," said his wife; "that is the usual signal that Uncle Oliver gives when

he is going to bed. He always bangs his boots on the floor, as if to remind us that he is still in the house. Just as if we could ever forget the fact!"

"I'm sure he is a very quiet, inoffensive old gentleman," said Vaness. "He does not even come downstairs to his meals, he is so much absorbed in the great work he is writing on, 'Black Magic.'"

"Black humbug!" retorted Nita. "For my part, I don't believe he is engaged in writing anything, but spends his days like a quack doctor, compounding horrible mixtures. I wonder the Board of Health has not indicted this house as a public nuisance, filled as it is all day with horrible smoke and smells. Some day while he is experimenting he will blow the roof off our heads, and then what good will the petrified cats and musty mummies be to you?"

"I can't understand," said Vaness, "why you have disliked that poor old chap from the first. We had a pitched battle when I offered him a home here, and you have

shown your distaste for him ever since. I am sure he must have heard you more than once talking disrespectfully about him."

"I hope he has. Perhaps he will take the hint, and look up another home where he will be more appreciated."

"It would not be wise," said Vaness, smiling, "to draw down the vengeance of a savant so versed in occult lore. Why, he might transform you into a cat or a fire-dog, and then wouldn't you be sorry that you had treated him unkindly?"

"I am not in the least alarmed about his possible vengeance," said Nita. "He is more adept in compounding smells than spells. Mark my words, but that poor Indian servant will be a corpse before the season is over. Do you know that Uncle Oliver tries his elixirs on that unhappy man several times a day, in order to study its effects? That poor, coffee-colored man changes like a chameleon, and his digestion is completely ruined. Whatever prompted you, Arthur, to offer a home to that miser-

able old mummy, with his pickled snakes and lop-eared gods, to whom, I dare say, he sacrifices in secret! I'm sure, if you do inherit some day all those horrid things in bottles, it will never repay you for being bothered by him so long."

"You talk very selfishly," said Arthur, now thoroughly angry. "If you thought less of yourself, and more of the comfort of those around you, you would not be so discontented. Uncle Oliver is one of my nearest relatives, and it was very natural, as he has no family, that I should offer him a home on his return from the East. Really, to judge from your conversation to-night, it is high time that you cut loose from your new acquaintances who fill your pretty head with absurd and selfish ideas. You used to be a kind-hearted, sensible little woman, but since you have joined this company of cranks I don't know what to make of you. This state of affairs cannot go on. I am worn out with overwork, and at home I hear nothing but complaints and tears. If any-

one has a right to murmur, I am the one. I have tried to make your life happy, but it seems I have failed. You find more enjoyment in the company of these precious meddlers than you do at home with your husband. I am heartily sick of it all. I wish—I wish I could change places with somebody, and forget that newspapers ever existed.”

He leaned his face on his hands, and for a moment neither spoke a word.

At length Nita raised her head.

“And if you are discontented with life, how much harder is the lot of a woman! You are not perpetually reminded that you must not do this or that because it is wrong. You come and go as you will, and there is no one to bid you stay. You may dance and flirt with whom you will. You can go about the world breaking hearts, as if they were so many egg-shells, while we are left at home to amuse ourselves as best we may. For you the light; for us the night. Oh, if I were only a man, you would never hear a word of complaint from my lips!”

“Well, there is not the slightest possibility of your becoming a man,” said Vaness, sarcastically; “so you may as well resign yourself to being an ordinary woman, and, let us hope, a sensible one.”

“What is impossible?” exclaimed a voice, with an audible chuckle that made husband and wife start guiltily.

The curtains parted, and a lean old man, clad in a long dressing-gown of some Eastern tissue, stepped across the threshold. His saffron features, wrinkled as a walnut-shell, were corrugated just now in a benevolent smile that displayed his sharp, uneven teeth. His yellow-white hair descended in long ringlets from beneath a velvet skull-cap, and his beady eyes seemed to flash with malicious fire as he slowly surveyed husband and wife from beneath his bushy eyebrows.

“Uncle Oliver!” they both exclaimed with one voice, at the sight of this grotesque apparition.

“I thought you had retired,” said Nita, uneasy. He might have overheard some of her

uncomplimentary remarks of a few moments ago.

“Well, I did make a start,” replied the old man, looking at the husband and wife again with that curious expression of half suspicion, “but I thought I heard the sound of loud and angry voices down here, and, as the hour was late, I ventured to see what was the trouble. I could not help hearing some sentences of your conversation—accidentally, of course.”

“Accidentally?” asked Nita, with doubtful emphasis.

“Accidentally, I said,” Uncle Oliver replied, blandly. “As your voices were somewhat raised, I could hardly escape hearing. From your remarks, I gathered that you are weary of your several lives. You, my dear niece, are pining for freedom, though I assure you that you enjoy a great deal more than wives did in my day. So you think you could be thoroughly happy if you were in Arthur’s place; you would gladly take up his cares and troubles, and think you had made the best of the bargain?”

"I would change places with him in a moment, if such a thing were possible," cried Nita, clasping her hands enthusiastically. "But why discuss such an impossibility, a dream that can never be realized?" the old frown returning to her face as she grew sadly thoughtful again.

Uncle Oliver looked at the bowed head and graceful figure on the sofa, and glided nearer to her, still with that benignant smile on his face that frightened Nita more than his frown.

"And if I were to tell you," he said, in a soft voice, scarcely louder than a whisper, "that such a metamorphosis as you so ardently desire is possible? If I were to tell you that you might change places with your husband here for a month, a week, a year?"

"I should say that you had been taking some of your own elixir, and that it had unsettled your reason," said Nita, bluntly.

"I expected that answer," said Uncle Oliver, not at all disconcerted. "Nevertheless, I am willing to prove all I say, if you are willing to

make the bargain and exchange your soul for his."

Nita sat up now, and was staring at him with her great blue eyes. But the old man's face was serious; not the symptom of a smile disturbed his withered features.

"If you could perform such a miracle, I would kneel at your feet and bless you," she cried, impetuously.

"But what is the use of gravely discussing such an impossibility. The days of enchantment are no more, alas!"

"And how about you, Arthur?" turning to his nephew, who was leaning on the mantle-piece. "Are you discontented as well with your present life? Would you be glad to change places with Nita? Take up the threads of her life work where she lays it down? You would not regret this bargain in souls?"

"Well, if you want me to consider such an absurd possibility in a serious light," said Vaness, "I am inclined to believe I should profit by the change. A vacation from the newspaper, with nothing to think

about except how I can best amuse myself, is a delightful prospect. I am heartily tired of my work—of smelling printers' ink all day long, and poring over dirty proofs. To idle on a sofa all day, and embroider impossible flowers, would be a great relief."

"Oh, you don't know how hard a woman's life is," put in Nita. "If you imagine it is a perpetual holiday, you are greatly mistaken. A few months would satisfy you that those who are compelled to wear skirts have no sinecure."

"I should be very willing to run the risk," said Arthur, with a smile. "But really, uncle, it seems to me we are a set of fools to stand here gravely discussing an absurd impossibility, when we ought to be in our several beds and sound asleep."

"But it is not impossible at all," said Uncle Oliver, with his peculiar chuckle. "Had you studied occultism as diligently as I have in the cave-temples of the East and with the fakirs of Lower Egypt, you would understand that more wonderful things than

an exchange of souls was possible to the adepts. It is only necessary that you shall agree to the bargain among yourselves, and your deliverance from your present earthly form is at hand. You shall change places. The soul of one shall possess the body of the other. Are you agreed, Arthur, that this metamorphosis shall take place?" turning to his nephew.

"If it pleases Nita. But really—"

"And you, my dear niece," interrupting him—"are you satisfied to forsake your petticoats and crewel-work without a sigh?"

"Without a sigh," echoed Nita, in an impressive voice.

The angular figure of the old man seemed to lengthen until it towered almost to the ceiling. The light filtering through the lustres on the chandeliers suffused his features with a weird and ghostly pallor. The shining arabesques on his crimson dressing-gown seemed to be written in fire as he

raised one of his flowing sleeves, and took from it a box of polished brass.

“Behold,” he cried, raising it aloft, “the mummy’s secret.”

II

THE MUMMY'S SECRET

Vaness looked gravely at the old man's picturesque figure, and then laughed.

"My dear uncle, you look like a necromancer from the Arabian Nights. You will frighten Nita into dreaming of hobgoblins until morning."

"I am not such a child," said that young lady, darting an angry glance at her husband. "Go on, Uncle Oliver, I am very much interested in what you were saying. Is it true, is it really true that souls can be translated—that the spirits of two people can change places?"

"It is true," said the sage, bowing his head.

"More wonderful things than that have been accomplished by the fakirs of the East, with whom I studied many years. Since you are both dissatisfied with your several existences, you can change places if you have the courage to follow my directions."

"I am sure I should be willing to make any sacrifice to accomplish such a blessed result," she replied. "It would be a glorious release."

"A dream of idle ease for me," said Arthur. "A long rest that I so much need. Is it a bargain, Nita—your soul for mine?"

"It is a bargain," clasping his hand in hers in token of the agreement.

"And may you never regret the compact!" echoed Uncle Oliver, looking at his niece with a malicious smile on his withered face.

"Regret it? Never!" she said, decidedly.

He shrugged his shoulders and laughed harshly.

"At least, you will not blame me then, when it is too late to change your mind."

Then turning to Arthur, who was in doubt whether to view the subject seriously or not, he said:

“You know I dabbled a good deal in mystic lore and occultism while I lived in the East. A month ago, on my birthday, I received a present from my old master, Ram Lal, with whom I studied in the cave-temples of Krishna. This present was a mummy, which he discovered at the foot of a colossal statue of Buddha. From the inscription on the case I learned that the mummy was that of an astrologer and savant who had held a high place in the court of Rameses II. The outer shell, of camphor-wood, richly gilded, was adorned with hieroglyphics and cabalistic signs, and along the edges, like a frieze, various scenes from the astrologer’s life were depicted in crude colors, but still fresh and easily decipherable. The temptation to open the case and examine this visitor from the past finally became too great to be resisted. I carefully removed the mummy from the

covering, and slowly began to unroll the long linen cloths with which the body was swathed, until the shrunken, mahogany-colored form of the savant lay before me."

Uncle Oliver paused to see if his audience was interested, then with a satisfactory sniff he continued: "I will not delay my story by describing the various emotions that filled me as I stood face to face with this celebrity who had thrived when history was young. He was not a picturesque object, save to a student in history, or an archæologist; but if I had been standing before a modern Helen I could not have been more charmed, or in a more melting mood.

"Long, white hair framed in the brown face with its gleaming teeth, and agate stones set in the empty eye-sockets gave him a life-like and terrifying appearance. It seemed to me that he was regarding me with a look of mingled malice and contempt.

"His withered hands were crossed upon his breast. On the right, glittered a signet-ring of chrysoprase, engraved with a sala-

mander; in the left, he held a papyrus scroll covered with minute hieroglyphics. You may imagine my profound joy at this discovery. What secrets might that scroll not contain! It might be the key to some mystery of the ages—the secrets of the Pyramids, a clue to the hidden treasures of Solomon.

“I saw myself decorated with a gold medal by the Society for the Promotion of Historical Research, and placed among the great discoverers of the age.

“For days I studied the signs on the scroll; but, versed as I was in Syrian, in Coptic and Eastern dialects, I could make nothing of this strange message that had come down to me through the centuries. The faded characters baffled all my study. But one day everything was made clear. The mummy’s secret was mine. The inscriptions on the case, which I had regarded with only languid interest, represented the key to the scroll. He who lay before me, by a long life of abstinence and

religious devotion, had attained the highest degree of spiritual perfection. This enabled him to perform things that would be considered nothing less than miracles in our own day. He was able to transfer the soul of the dying into the earthly form of one who was dead; and he recounted how he had prolonged the life of his royal master by transferring his soul at the last hour into the body of a slave. He was also able to change the souls of two people who had become weary of their several existences and desired to lead new lives.

“Much was revealed in the scroll about the medical secrets of the time; but that will not interest you now. I confess I was somewhat disappointed in my discovery, for, apart from its scientific value, the secret of the transfer of souls was of little use.

“But lately it has dawned upon me that this house was no longer a love-bird's nest, such as poets delight to sing about, but a gilded cage, whose inmates were struggling to be free. I learned that you, my dear niece,

had grown weary of wearing what you call the shackles of womanhood, and longed for freedom from conventional laws. Arthur, too, finds life not all his fancy painted. His ambition remains unsatisfied, and he longs for a rest from work and the cares of his profession. In short, wife and husband envy each other, and would gladly change places. Am I right?"

"Perfectly," said Nita. "Oh, Uncle Oliver, are you really not poking fun at us? It all sounds so much like a dream. Can we really exchange souls?"

"If you will. I have long wanted to try the experiment. You have only to agree to the bargain, and that which you so ardently wish for shall become a reality."

"I am ready," said Nita, eagerly.

"And you, Arthur?"

"Oh, I am quite content. I have never denied Nita any pleasure yet that was proper, and since this will make her happier—"

"Oh, it will, it will!" enthusiastically.

“Go on, Uncle Oliver; I am all impatience.”

“And you are quite sure you will never repent, and wish yourself a woman again?” with a sly twinkle in his eyes.

“Quite sure.”

“Very well,” said the sage. “I have warned you of the worst. If the future brings a tardy repentance, you have only yourselves to blame.”

He approached Nita and took her hand in his. It was cold as ice, and she was trembling with suppressed emotion. He led her slowly across the room to where Arthur was standing regarding them with a smile, in which doubt and wonder were mingled. Uncle Oliver took his hand, and placed it in that of his wife.

“It is not too late to withdraw from your bargain,” addressing them.

“Go on,” said Vaness.

“I am ready,” echoed Nita, feeling a strange fluttering sensation in the regions of the heart.

The old man took a brass bowl from the

mantel-piece and placed it on the floor between husband and wife. Then from his flowing sleeve he drew the curious box that glittered with a phosphorescent fire beneath the chandelier. He opened it, and took out a tiny scroll discolored with age. A tremor of fear or anxiety passed over the young man and woman.

“Shall I go on?”

“Go on,” whispered Nita, faintly.

Uncle Oliver drew some powders from the box and threw them in the bowl, muttering the while some unintelligible words as he read the scroll.

At once a blue smoke, dense and acrid, rose like a cloud from the brazier, almost hiding the three forms from each other's view. Again he sprinkled some powders in the vessel, and the three seemed to be floating in an opaque mist, through which the outlines of the figures were clearly discerned.

The gaunt old man seemed to assume giant proportions as he stood muttering

incantations; the sparkling arabesques on his gown seemed animated with life, and burned like fiery embers. His long hair twisted and uncoiled like silver serpents, and his eyes gleamed with an unnatural light that was not of earth.

A strange feeling of lightness and buoyancy came over Nita, as the cloud of incense rose about her like the waters of a smooth, gray sea. She closed her eyes, overcome with a sudden faintness as she seemed to be lifted up on these waves of perfume and borne away into oblivion.

The smoke grew denser. The silent figures became mere shadows in the mist. Through the veil the old man's voice sounded like a far-off murmur. Only his eyes flashed with a strange fire through the clouds that shrouded the group in its soft gray folds.

The two who stood with clasped hands had relapsed into a trance; they stood motionless, as if bound by a spell.

Slowly the incense lifted, and above the

silent figures hovered two pale blue flames, filmy and transparent. The lights wavered, then, as if blown by some invisible breath, were wafted towards each other, passed, and quivered above the heads of the man and woman. Then suddenly they grew dim and faded into thin air. The smoke of incense disappeared, and the silent figures became strangely distinct and clear. Slowly Nita opened her eyes and looked around, with a dazed expression of wonder in her dreamy eyes.

“That dream,” she murmured, passing a trembling hand across her heavy eyelids. “I seemed to be drifting away on a sea of smoke, and Uncle Oliver—” But the old man had disappeared.

How strange her voice sounded! It was like some one else speaking; and yet each tone had a familiar ring that she had heard somewhere before.

“You have not been dreaming at all,” said a gentle voice at her side; “it is a solemn reality. Look there.”

She turned where a jewelled hand pointed towards the broad pier-glass on the wall, then started back with a cry of alarm and surprise.

No, it was assuredly no dream. She saw the reflection of a stalwart young man of about thirty-two, who confronted her in an awkward attitude, and whose blue eyes peered at her just now with timid wonderment. Then as his long fingers wandered towards his face and came in contact with a brown mustache, they recoiled as if stung by the points.

A soft laugh at her side reminded her that she was not alone.

“Where is your courage?” asked the voice she had heard before. “Behold the result of our bargain in souls!”

She turned, and confronted her former self face to face. The same soft, brown hair that had been her pride in former days. The dainty mouth that had so often smiled back at her from her boudoir mirror, now wreathed with a malicious grin. Two

laughing eyes that were regarding her just now with an air of ill-disguised amusement. Two white hands, covered with shining rings, that were awkwardly twisting the fringe on the soft silk dress.

“What! don’t you recognize your old self?” laughed the well-dressed apparition. “Or are you falling in love with the manifold charms that were once your individual property? I suppose you are better able to appreciate them now that you can get a bird’s-eye view. To tell the truth, now that I regard you critically, I confess that I never had any idea that I was such a good-looking fellow; though I am equally certain that I did not hold myself in that ungraceful and disjointed way, like a badly-articulated puppet, nor wave my hands about in that idiotic fashion.”

“You need not flatter yourself that you are such a picturesque figure, for all your physical advantages,” cried Nita, indignantly, as she wiped one end of that terrible mustache into her eye, which brought forth an invol-

untary tear. "You will have that dress in shreds if you persist in trying to find a pocket where there is none. A nice representative of the softer sex you will make with those awkward hands that are never still. You had better tie them together, since you find them so unmanageable," with a sneer.

"I shall have pockets made in every fold of this precious garment to-morrow," said Arthur, angrily. "There isn't a place even to carry a cigar."

"Ladies do not carry cigars—that is, the ones I am acquainted with, though I dare say in your set—"

"That's so; I forgot. It takes some time to get accustomed to being a woman, you know."

"I don't believe years would ever produce any change in you. Don't stand there with your feet wide apart; it is hardly elegant. Really, Arthur, I had no idea you were such an ungraceful object."

"Perhaps you think you are a poem of

beauty," giving the skirt an angry kick. "There, now, don't try to swallow the end of my mustache, I beg of you; it took me many years of care and study to give it that romantic droop."

"I am not going to swallow the nasty thing," said Nita, in a choking voice, "and to-morrow it shall disappear entirely, the first thing when I get up."

"Nita," solemnly, "I forbid you to lay an impious finger on that mustache. It took me a long while to get it into that state of poetic perfection. You once said it was charming."

"To look at from a distance, perhaps; but it doesn't seem to fit my face, so it shall be sacrificed as soon as possible."

"I forbid you to trifle with my features, to rob my face of its principal charm. It is a breach of contract. You accepted the fixtures and the good-will to carry on my business. No alterations are permitted. If you persist in your intention, I shall have this curly mop shaved off, and wear a red wig."

“You would destroy my lovely hair,” with a sob.

“Certainly.”

“Heartless creature! have you no thought of the past, when it was your delight to stroke those curls you would now sacrifice?”

“Yes, I shall cut them off and sell them and pocket the money, unless you promise that my mustache will be respected.”

“But I am master now,” said Nita, stamping her foot. “Do not anger me, or I shall be tempted to prove my authority. It was your turn an hour ago; it is my turn now. Do this at your peril, and I shall have you placed in a private asylum, where they will spare you the trouble of shaving your head, and where a strait-jacket will dispose of your awkward hands.”

Arthur saw by her determined voice that it was best to effect a compromise. It suddenly dawned over him that he was in the minority; that his power had passed from him.

“Very well, my dear,” in a soft voice. “I

will keep your curls on condition that you treat my mustache with proper respect. But do not be harsh; it has been the pride of my life; and, as I hoped, the joy of my declining years. Each hair is hallowed by a kiss; you know that only too well. It has been delicately reared; do not forget the brilliantine, which you will find on my dressing-case."

"Fortunately for my curls," said Nita, unmoved by his eloquence, "you will have a maid." Then, suddenly, she looked at him fixedly and repeated, "A maid."

"Well?" he asked "that is rather a convenience, I should say, and particularly as Rosalie happens to be good-looking," with a smile.

"A great attraction to you, I dare say," with scornful emphasis. "But as I am the head of the house now, I shall discharge this young person to-morrow—do you understand?—and get a darkey in her place."

"Oh, that is a matter of entire indifference to me," with a careless laugh.

"So I supposed."

"At least," he continued, "I shall have a

servant to wait on me—a luxury I have never been able to afford when I was only an ordinary man. Now, my dear, I think you had better retire, for you will have a busy day tomorrow, and you ought to allow a few hours in the morning to dress. I am usually called at eight, but you had better make it six, in order to be sure; and no breakfast to be sent up to your room in the morning, remember, or reading novels in bed until ten o'clock; those little luxuries are the perquisites of my position.”

Nita could not suppress a groan.

“I am quite satisfied. We shall see, when the day is finished, who has been the gainer by the exchange. You will not find your path so rose-strewn as you think; and as for the meals, I tremble at the thought of your superintending them. The cook, you know, has to be told everything.”

“Don't be a bit alarmed, my dear, regarding the *cuisine*. I shall establish it on a scientific basis. No more shall we be confronted with cold fried chops and terra-cotta

pies. My favorite books in the library are Brillat-Savarin and Francatelli; and since I shall have so much time on my hands, I can experiment in all their mysteries. You will need to invest in a larger suit of clothes before the month is out, when I take charge of the *cuisine*."

"More likely it will be a shroud that I shall need," said Nita. "Don't expect to experiment on me as Uncle Oliver does with his servant. Of course I shall take most of my meals at the club, while you are poisoning yourself at home. You might invest in a mild-tempered ostrich, if you want to experiment in cooking; it would be less dangerous to your own health, I am certain."

"Ah," said Vaness, thoughtfully "what delightful little luncheons I shall give! and Japanese teas, and Indian tiffins!"

"Yes, that will be delightful," cried Nita, clapping her hands.

"Oh, but you won't be there. Men will be strictly excluded, you know. About that time you will be reading proofs, and wielding the

blue pencil, and getting yourself smeared with ink, and swearing at stupid compositors."

"I shall not swear," said Nita, very decidedly.

"Oh, but you must; you can't get along without it very well. It rather stimulates them in their work. Suppose I copy out a few mild oaths for you to use; you can rehearse them before a mirror in the morning, or on your way to the office. A little gentle profanity often goes a good way in some cases."

"Well, if they are very mild—very little tiny swear-words," said Nita, reluctantly.

"Oh, you don't want them too mild, or they will have no effect. You'll soon get used to it, and find a little profanity greatly strengthens your conversation. Gives it a sort of piquant relish, don't you know."

"What horrid creatures men are!" sighed Nita. "It will take me a long time to retrieve your lost reputation. I shall be handicapped from the start, while you begin your new life with a clean page."

“I think,” said Arthur, meditatively, “that I shall celebrate my *debut* in society by giving a pink tea to-morrow afternoon. It will give me an opportunity to get acquainted with some of the young ladies you so often entertained while I was toiling down town. There’s Miss Olcott, on the next block, and Dorothy Goldthwaite, who will make a charming *vis-a-vis*, and—”

“I won’t have you entertaining those artful coquettes while I am absent,” said Nita. “It—it’s not proper.”

Vaness laughed.

“Have you begun to regret your bargain already? Remember, when we made this bargain to change souls, you were to take up my life exactly where I left it, and I, in turn, was to inherit your troubles and pleasures. Your friends have become my friends; and very delightful ones, I have no doubt, I shall find them. I must give a little party, in order to get more intimately acquainted with them.”

“Very well,” said Nita; “then I shall fre-

quent the club and the cafés, and find out what sort of a life you have led in the past, and what sort of a set you move in—you and your precious friend, Jack Follansby.”

“Phew!” whistled the husband, a little startled; “he will lead you a pretty dance if you follow his directions. Now, really, Nita, I don’t think the Rounders’ Club is exactly the place for you. You may hear yourself—that is, me—talked about. Of course, with such a large membership, a number of cads belong to it whom I never speak to.”

“Oh, pray don’t alarm yourself on my account,” said Nita. “I expect to be shocked there, as well as at some of your other favorite resorts. I am anxious to know what the attractions are that have kept you out so often until early morning. You never would tell me yourself, but now I shall be able to investigate on my own account. What a delightful prospect!” clapping her hands together delightedly. “It will be as good as a play. I shall not sleep for thinking about it.”

"Then you had better retire now," said Vaness, grumpily; "it will bring the day of liberty all the nearer. I am going, anyway," turning towards the door. "Now don't make a racket with your boots in the morning, as I want to finish a novel before breakfast. Good-night."

Nita stepped forward and then hesitated, as he moved towards the door.

"Are—are you not going to kiss me good-night, as—as you generally do?" she stammered, with an anxious tremor in her voice that gave Vaness a feeling of malicious joy.

He looked at the blushing face of the stalwart young man before him a little doubtfully.

"Well, ye , I suppose so, since it is customary."

"Oh, Arthur!" she murmured, plaintively, "one would think that you found it a disagreeable task."

"Well, I never carried my egotism so far as to feel like kissing myself," with a smile; "but here goes."

He touched the flushed cheek with his lips and passed on.

“Good-night,” he said.

“Good-night,” sighed Nita, preparing to follow the lady in gray.

III

BY MORNING LIGHT

“Nine o’clock,” mumbled Vaness, drowsily, as a shaft of sunlight fell across his eyes.

“I suppose it’s time for me to begin the daily grind again,” with a yawn. “I wish that dream had continued for half an hour longer. The oddest thing! Nita and I had made a bargain to exchange souls, and—”

He half rose in the bed, and stared around the room, all blue and gold like the heart of a violet.

“By Jove! was it a dream?” he asked himself, with a vague air of doubt. “This is Nita’s boudoir, sure enough. Could she—? Well, I must settle this question right away.”

Slipping out of the sheets, he walked over to the mirror on the toilet-table, and stood for a moment in silent contemplation of the slender figure reflected in its depths. He saw a graceful form draped in snowy cambric and foamy lace, a piquant face lit by two soft blue eyes that now regarded him with a serious expression in their calm depths, and a coronal of gold-brown hair.

“It wasn’t a dream at all,” said Vaness, running his white fingers dreamily through the glistening curls. “It is a beautiful reality! What a blessed thought, that I can now sleep as late as I please, and not be compelled to imprison myself in a dingy office the best part of the day! It is almost too good to be true. I am almost afraid to study the mirror again, lest I should come face to face with my old self. Well, I won’t try to sleep any more this morning. This revelation has banished all my drowsiness. I must get accustomed to my sudden change of fortune”—walking up and down the room, with a glance now and then at the small bare feet, that

seemed to be playing hide and seek under the lace edges of the *robe de nuit*.

Suddenly he paused with a start before a chair at the foot of the bed. It was piled high with snowy muslins, from which peeped the toes of some black silk stockings and a coquettish looking pair of corsets of pale-blue satin. He stared at this pyramid dubiously for a moment, and then laughed uproariously.

“How in thunder shall I know how to put these contrivances on?” ruefully. “For a married man I am singularly ignorant about such mysteries.”

Just then a knock, timid and discreet, sounded at the door.

“Good heavens, a woman!” cried Vaness, as he caught sight of a jaunty French cap, and he made a leap for the bed and drew the coverlet up close to his throat, eyeing the visitor with wide-staring eyes. “I forgot all about Rosalie,” he muttered, as the apparition came in view. “A fellow can’t get used to having a maid around right away”—and he chuckled at the humor of the situation.

“Is madame ready to get up?” asked Rosalie, gently.

She was a slender little woman with a demure face, framed by a lace cap of many bows, and her apron displayed two pockets that were positively bewitching. Under the skirt of dull blue cloth peeped two coquettish little shoes that might have inspired a rondeau in a romantic poet. Vaness thought it would not take him very long to get accustomed to her presence.

“Well, this situation is getting decidedly interesting,” he murmured to himself.

“Well, Rosalie, what do you want?”

“Why, I come to help madame to dress,” in astonished tones.

“Come to—help—me—to—dress,” exploding with laughter. “Oh, this is too much!” Then, seeing that Rosalie was regarding him curiously, he controlled his mirth. “Pshaw! I keep forgetting who I am,” in an undertone. “This won’t do at all. I must remember my position.”

“Ah,” said the maid, “madame moost

have had zee pleasant dreams last night zat she laugh, eh, so moch!" bustling about the room on various incomprehensible errands.

"Yes, very funny," said Vaness, following her curiously with his eyes.

"With monsieur it was *le contraire*," she returned. "I tink he moost have dreamed of ten souzand devils las' night, or been out wiz—wiz ze boys, vat you call it?"—taking some garments out of the wardrobe and smoothing them out on a chair.

"What put such an absurd notion in your head?" asked Vaness, who felt the remark to be a personal one.

"Because when I pass his door zis morning," shaking out a skirt, "he bang on zee door and howl for me to come in. He was so mad he foam. He tremble so wiz rage he no could dress himself, and he try to put on his trousairs over his head. Oh, he vair bad!" shaking her head sadly.

"I should think so," said Vaness, doubling up with mirth as the picture framed itself in his imagination.

“I haf nevair seen monsieur in sooch a temper,” said Rosalie, fussing over the strange garments on the chair. “You should find out what it is zat trouble him.”

“Yes, he is greatly changed,” said Vaness, with a sigh. “All his amiable temperament has disappeared.”

“And he was so sweet before,” cried Rosalie, clasping her hands and rolling her eyes towards the ceiling.

“Eh?”

“A man to love, to adore.”

“Yes—Yes, he was all that,” nodding his head with an air of conviction. “I quite agree with you; but I am afraid he has changed. He will never be such a model husband again. His virtues were too many to stand the trying test of time.”

“Ah, zeeze men, zeeze men!” sighed Rosalie. “Zay laugh to-day, to-morrow zay sink of suicide. He stay away. It may be zat zere is anozzair vooman in zee case.”

“Rosalie, I forbid you to speak so of Mr. Vaness. He is a man of honor. He would

never carry on a vulgar intrigue in secret."

Rosalie shrugged her shoulders and was silent.

"*Toute la maison est devenue folle,*" she said as she went out, shaking her head with an air of conviction that Mrs. Vaness was as crazy as her husband.

She soon returned to her mysterious labors at the dressing-table.

"Now, Rosalie," said Vaness, as he re-entered the room a few moments later, and paused by the chair where the strange white garments were piled, "help me to climb into these—these what-do-you-call-'ems," taking up a snowy trifle of linen and lace gingerly and eyeing it at arm's length with some trepidation. "This damned garment must be a dress-reform bustle or a sanitary cutaway, considerably cut away."

"Oh, madame!" shivered Rosalie, covering her ears.

"Well, what's the matter now?"

"Nozzing—nozzing; it is possible zat I misunderstood. Pardon! pardon!" and the

momentous operation of dressing the slender figure before her was begun.

“Ouch!” cried Vaness, “there goes a pin into me. Can’t you hook up this—this arrangement, or tie it on with strings, or buckle it, or—hang it! why not get along without it? I should think the rest of the pile would be enough of a load to carry.”

“*Mais non, c’est impossible,*” gurgled the maid, with her mouth full of pins.

“Well, hurry up, anyway,” said Vaness impatiently, “for I am just dying to have a smoke.”

“A smoke!” echoed Rosalie, pausing in the midst of her work with a shiver of dismay.

“Yes, a smoke;” then suddenly recollecting, “No I meant a drink.”

“Madame drink an’ smoke? *Quel malheur!* Is it zat she has acquired zee habit lately?”

“No, no; you slightly misunderstood me. I feel a little mixed this morning; that peculiar dream is still running in my head. What I meant was a smoking drink, don’t you see? —a smoking drink—my morning coffee.”

“Oh, zis Anglais is sooch a peculiar language, I am sure I shall never learn it. Ven I hear madame speak of zee drink an’ zee smoke I tink she has found a—a—”

“Well, found what? Don’t stand there gibbering in that absurd way.”

“A lovail.”

“Eh?”

“A lovail.”

“Oh, a ‘lovail’ and smoke and drink go to-gether, eh?” smiled Vaness.

“*Mais oui certainement*, generally—zat is, in Paris. I have not zee knowledge how it is in *l’Amerique*.”

“Oh, the ‘lovail’ is unknown in New York,” he said, very gravely.

“*C’est possible?*” very much astonished.

“To tell the truth, Rosalie,” in a stage-whisper, “there is one man whom I am very much in love with.”

“Ah!” pricking up her ears, “I knew it was impossible for one of madame’s figure to remain long wizout one—and he is *gentil?* *il est beau?*”

“Oh, he’s a lovely creature, I assure you. Curly brown hair, a cavalry mustache, and melting brown eyes.”

“Just like monsieur?”

“Oh, you could hardly tell them apart.”

Rosalie looked around the room stealthily, and then whispered mysteriously:

“It is good zat madame has made ozzair arrangements.”

“Why, what do you mean?”

“Because ven I brush zee coats of Mr. Vaness I often come upon notes in a lady’s handwriting.”

“Oh, you little devil!” exclaimed the listener to himself; “I guess it is about time for you to go.” Then to Rosalie, “Oh, those are only business letters. An editor receives correspondence from all sorts of people. Hurry up with this dressing. Haven’t you hooked me together enough for one day? I don’t see any sense, anyway, in all these straps and hooks and buttons.”

“Now I must fix madame’s hair.”

“Oh, it will do as it is.”

“Impossible.”

“Are, you going to stick all those hairpins in my head?”

“*Mais oui.*”

“Oh, roll it up in a knot; I feel like a pin-cushion already.”

“But madame may have visitors; she must be ready to receive at all hours.”

“What a nuisance! Well, get through as quick as you can. If I have to go through this performance every morning, I shall go mad.” At last, after much growling and impatience on the part of Vaness, Rosalie completed her task. He paused for a moment to survey the charming figure presented in the glass. The flowing folds of pale blue *crepe de Chine* half hid and half revealed the supple form beneath. The snowy cascade of lace fell from throat to hem, not whiter than the jewelled hands, and glimpses of a bosom that shone in the sunlight like mother-of-pearl. And crowning all, the oval face was flushed just now with a delicate rose that might have inspired Watteau.

“I never thought my wife was so charming,” said Vaness to himself. “It must be that the soul has imparted to the eyes a new beauty that was lacking before.”

Suddenly he caught a glimpse of another face, Rosalie’s, peering over his shoulder. She was admiring her work, and it suddenly struck him that she was a very picturesque little person.

“Do you know,” turning suddenly, “that you are a pretty girl, Rosalie,—a very pretty girl?”

“They have informed me that I am exquisite,” said Rosalie, demurely, as she adjusted a silk bow on her wonderful lace cap.

Vaness had kissed her before he knew what he was about. Turning he saw Nita.

“My dear Nita—I mean Arthur,” he stammered.

His wife turned to the girl. “Rosalie.”

“Monsieur!”—very much in wonder what the trouble was all about.

“You leave to-day.”

“But, monsieur—”

“Not another word, shameless girl. This is a return for all my kindness to you. I dare say, however, that madame will be pleased to send you cards for her receptions”—and with this parting shaft Nita turned abruptly and went clumping noisily down the stairs.

“*Oh quel malheur!*” cried Rosalie, wringing her hands and sobbing, “what is zat I have done?”

“Don’t raise such a row,” groaned Vaness. “Here—here,” rushing to the bureau and taking out some money, which he thrust into her trembling hands. “Take this and stop crying!” and before she could reply, he was bounding down the stairs as rapidly as the long trailing skirts would permit.

He found Nita seated at the head of the table, glowering at a platter of poached eggs. He took his place silently at the end of the board, and seemed to be very much interested in the morning paper, over which he peered at the stern features of his *vis-a-vis*.

“It is quite evident,” Nita began, crunching savagely a piece of toast, “that you did

not lose any time in availing yourself of the opportunities of your position. I really thought better of you," choking down a sob. "If this is the beginning, what terrible revelations I shall learn before many days have passed! Oh, how unhappy I am!" wiping a dim eye with a corner of her napkin. "How unhappy I am!"

"Now don't be silly, my dear," said Vaness, recovering his composure. "This exchange of position was made entirely with your consent. You were delighted with the prospect that I was to relieve you of your galling chains, in return for my liberty. Besides, supposing I did give the girl a fatherly kiss. It was a thoughtless impulse, and neither of us are any the worse for it that I can see. You are not going to repent at this early stage of our comedy?"

"It will prove a drama—a tragic drama, I know," said Nita, plaintively. "You may have done something horrible in the past, and I shall have to bear the punishment for it. Perhaps you were glad to escape from

your evil life, and thought this exchange would make you free. I see it all; it was a plan to get rid of me—a cruel conspiracy,” relapsing into tears.

Vaness went on quietly eating, until the sobs grew fainter.

“Don’t you think you had better go and bathe your eyes in some cold water?” he said, crunching noisily a piece of toast. “It is nearly time for you to appear at the office, and it wouldn’t look well for an editor to have been crying. They are not supposed to be supplied with tears, or any emotions whatever. Suppose the rival editor across the way were to see you snivelling? It would be a huge joke, especially as I told him only last week that I should pull his nose in public if he ever abused me in print again. I leave it to you to carry out my promise.”

“What, to pull his nose?” asked Nita, faintly.

“Exactly.”

“But I—I don’t want to pull anybody’s nose.”

“Oh, but you must, if he opens fire again. The honor of the paper is at stake. Of course he may try to cane you, or punch your head; but you mustn’t mind a little thing like that. Anyway, he is a rank coward, so there is small chance of retaliation. But don’t let him strike you in the face. I beg of you to guard those sacred features which I have trusted you with as you would your life. I could never contemplate them again with joy if one of the eyes were missing, or a well-directed blow had knocked my classic nose out of perspective.”

“Oh!” moaned Nita, passing a trembling hand over her features, to see if they were still intact—“oh!”

“You’ll get used to being horsewhipped, in time,” pursued the tormenter, “and find it increases your circulation as well as that of the paper. And now, while I don’t want to hurry you,” looking at the clock, “I think you ought to be on your way down-town. You know how eager you were last night to begin your glorious career; this morning

your impatience seems to have entirely disappeared. Now, when you get to the office, what do you propose to do? How will you begin your work of reconstruction?"

"You would only laugh at me if I were to tell you," said Nita. "I have rules for everything set down in this book," taking out a note-book. "For some months I have been compiling this volume, and there are questions and answers that apply to every situation."

"What is the answer when a defeated candidate or a rival editor rushes in and tries to shoot the cigar out of your mouth? It would be useful to know."

"I—I haven't got that down. It can't be possible such things occur in a New York office. You are only trying to frighten me."

"Such things don't occur, eh? Why, I dug a dozen bullets out of the wall only a month ago, and had them moulded into the handsome paper-weight you will find on the desk; and as for the editorial chair, why it's as full of buckshot as a Christmas pudding is full of

plums. You will have more than one surprise awaiting you, my dear. I suppose you found a schedule of the office-work in my pocket?"

"Yes, and a great many other things besides," said Nita. "You would have done well to have destroyed most of your papers before we changed places."

"Eh? What's that?"

"Among your assets I found a letter—an invitation from a woman," triumphantly.

"Oh yes, I remember. The annual dinner of the Stage Society—a very worthy charity. Of course I have to go to all such entertainments in order to be on good terms with the managers—"

"And actresses too, I suppose," said Nita, meekly. But Vaness did not hear.

"You see, we get forty cents a line from the theatres, and a dollar a line for personal puffs. Now don't be writing influential actresses down because you don't like the way they fix their hair, or because they wear false teeth; it would be just like a woman."

"I shall maintain my position with dignity," said his *vis-a-vis*. "I am fully aware how the editor of a paper should conduct himself."

"That's very well ; but while you are maintaining your dignity, also look after the dollars. Our dramatic critic is a young man and rather thoughtless. When a new play is announced and he happens to have some friends in the company, he is very liable to give them a lot of free advertising, which is clear loss to us. The idea is not to commit yourself one way or the other until you see what the manager is going to do. There's Morton, for instance, of the Fourth Avenue Theatre. When he brings out a new play, he can always be depended on for a five-hundred-dollar notice ; but don't find fault with him because he wears red whiskers and swears like a trooper."

"But supposing the play is bad ?"

"Well, you must discover some good points, whether they exist or not. If the New York papers only discussed good plays,

they would have trouble filling their theatrical columns."

"A public journal," said Nita, referring to the little note-book, "should be a mirror of truth, an enemy of fraud and humbugs, a champion of the right. It never should be swayed by mere monetary considerations."

"That's very pretty. I believe in speaking the truth, too; that is, if it doesn't interfere with your income."

"A grovelling sentiment worthy of a man," with disdain. "No wonder that the press has become an object of contempt, a telephone through which the vilest can buy the right to speak."

"Your sentiments do you a vast amount of credit, but it would require a great deal of money to carry them out. If I were to follow my own inclinations concerning the editorship of 'The Owl,' we should not be living in such a comfortable home, we should not be so well dressed or well fed. Look around this room. You see that Steinway piano in the corner?"

“Yes.”

“Where did it come from?”

“Why, it was a present from you on my last birthday.”

“Not at all; you received it through me from Alderman McGoozle, as a thank-offering for services rendered while he was running for office.”

“Oh!” with a long-drawn sigh.

“That pearl-laid secretary by the wall was a present from a genial murderer whose acquittal we helped to secure.”

“Oh!”

“Why, you have been dressing yourself for the past three years out of the perquisites of office. Your spring bonnet represents Lopeared Mick’s victory over the Lancashire Spider, and your Easter costume the gratitude of a defaulting cashier. Your—”

“You’d better not go any farther,” said Nita.

“Well, I only wanted to show you that while we may cherish the noblest principles and sentiments, as editors it is well to keep

them under the control of a golden key. To go clothed in virtuous sentiments will not protect you from the inclemency of the weather, nor is a righteous principle in your mouth going to satisfy the cravings of an empty stomach."

"You shall see," said Nita, decidedly "that it only needs a brave heart to make honesty pay. There may be some resistance at the first, but in the end right must prevail."

"And in the meantime we stand a fair chance of starving," said Vaness, rising from the table.

"Wait," Nita replied laying down her napkin. "I shall soon have an opportunity to show you that I am right."

"Well, you don't seem to be very eager to begin," with a malicious smile.

The sun filtering through the orange silk curtains filled every nook and corner of the cosy dining-room with a comfortable glow, bringing into relief its luxurious chairs that invited rest, the dainty paintings on the wall, the cheerful nook in the bow-window piled

with embroidered cushions. The sofa looked so soft and inviting that Nita could not repress a sigh of regret as she thought of the many idle hours she had dozed away in its velvet embrace. And there lay the novel she had laid down the night before, unfinished.

She walked into the parlor, slowly trying to conceal from him the emotions that were struggling for the mastery. It would never do to let him know that she had begun to weaken so soon. Where were all her courage and braveness?

"And what are you going to do all day?" she asked Vaness, with an affected carelessness, adjusting a refractory necktie that had worked its way over her ear.

"Oh, I haven't thought much about it," with a yawn; lie off and read, I suppose. I have not had time in the past three years for anything but newspapers and police-reports. When I get hungry, I shall study Franca-teli and experiment with some of his mysteries. I have often thought that if circumstances had not forced me into journalism I

should have become a professional cook. It must be a very enjoyable life, I imagine, and much more profitable. The *cuisine* is the most important educator of the century. What historic memories fill the mind at the sight of a *bœuf à la Mirabeau*! and a hundred songs rise from the smoke of a dish of *bouillabaisse*."

"Fortunately, I shall not be here for your ghoulish repasts," said Nita. "Now that I have some liberty of action, I can pick out my restaurants."

"By all means, my dear; dine out as often as you please. I shall not lack for society. You know Miss Olcott lives only a block away and I dare say she would be glad to dine here instead of at the boarding-house where she is condemned to live."

"You know how I detest that woman," said Nita, frowningly.

"Why, you always kiss her most affectionately when you meet—an established custom which I suppose I must respect," with a laugh.

"It is policy for me to treat her kindly, because she has a very sharp tongue, and if we quarrelled she might talk about me."

"Well, I shall cultivate her for the same reason; and I have no doubt we shall get along very well together. You see, I shall have so much time on my hands, you being away all day—"

"I shall make it my business to be here to-night at five o'clock if you are going to dine alone."

"But I sha'n't be alone. I shall have those four lovely girls to keep me company."

"Oough!"

"Besides, your business will detain you at the office until six at the earliest, for, after the last edition is out, you must arrange for the next day. Of course you will have a chance to get some pork and beans at the corner between-times."

"But I don't like pork and beans," wailed Nita.

"Oh you must get used to them. They are

considered the proper food for brain-workers."

"You are only trying to frighten me into believing that your life in the past has been one of privations. I don't believe anything of the kind. At least I shall be free to do as I please."

"I don't know about that," shaking his head; "but we shall see."

"Yes, we shall see," cried Nita, turning towards the door.

"Hold on; you are going off without your hat."

"Oh, bother the hat!" coming back.

Finally equipped, she started off again.

"I shall look forward to the first edition," he said.

"You will be astonished."

"I expect to be."

"Horrid thing! Now, when I come back, you—you, must tell me everything that has happened—every word that you say to those girls at supper."

"Ya—as, unless my memory fails me.

And, my dear, I expect you to be equally confidential. We shall now have the opportunity to see ourselves as others see us."

"Oh!" exclaimed Nita, as a sudden thought flashed through her mind; but she did not give it expression in words, and fled from the room slamming the door behind her.

"Funny little creature!" said Vaness, with a meditative smile. "I really believe she has begun to weaken already, but is too proud to let me know it. I am afraid she has made a bad bargain. Anyway, the experience may cure her. It may be good for us both. I know I was sorely in need of a vacation. A whole day and nothing to do! A pleasant prospect, but apt to prove monotonous."

He walked up and down the room, suddenly pausing before the side-board.

"I am all alone," looking around furtively. "I might take a morning refresher and a smoke, and no one need be a whit the wiser. It will add so much to the satisfaction when I have to do it surreptitiously."

He tried the doors of the sideboard. They were locked.

“Just my luck!” grumbling; “and I was just beginning to feel precious dry.”

He rang the bell, and Rosalie, with traces of recent tears on her face, appeared in the doorway. “Rosalie, where are the keys of the sideboard?”

“*Mais*, madame, they are in the care of monsieur.”

“Oh! that’ll do.”

Vaness sank into a chair and growled out:

“Well it isn’t such a sinecure to be a woman after all!”

IV

THE EDITOR'S BUSY DAY

"The Evening Owl" belonged to that class of peculiar papers which have sprung into existence in the metropolis during the past decade. It had been founded originally by a Russian refugee, and there were no less than six hundred stockholders who held from one to a hundred shares in the enterprise.

The founder, having started the paper on a few hundred dollars, had almost starved to death the first six months, and to discharge his obligations he gave stock instead of money. Thus it happened that even the boot-black on the corner and the beanery in

the basement held shares in the paper, which had now become a very valuable property, owing a great deal to the efforts of its humble shareholders.

For the boot-black and the bean-baker, and others of their ilk, finding themselves in possession of so much of the journal's scrip, at that time worth little more than the paper on which it was printed, began to dabble in journalism themselves, and banded together to secure news that would advance "The Evening Owl's" circulation.

The boot-black, who had free range of the office buildings on the block, stumbled across many sensations in going his rounds, and received many confidences from inviting keyholes. The Pole who had acted in the capacity of man-servant to the late editor, and had been left a wad of stock instead of wages, belonged to the "Gentlemen's Gentlemen Club," made up of valets, cooks, and coachmen, and at the weekly dinners of the association he gathered from his companions the most interesting chapters from family closets.

No one who rode in horse-cars, or went to theatres, or lunched in cafes could be certain that some emissary of the "Evening Owl" was not within ear-shot. And young married couples at the hotels were often surprised at the assiduous attentions of the bell-boys, who insisted upon bringing up ice-water at all hours of the night and morning, and answered their calls with suspicious alacrity.

Other journals might stagnate for want of news. "The Evening Owl" was ever ready with a sensation. Without waiting for the wheels of time to grind out a dramatic episode or startling catastrophe, it applied the oil of ingenuity to the axles and increased the revolutions. The city was a checker-board in the opinion of the editor, and he moved his men here and there at will, creating catastrophes and leading them into complications. "The Evening Owl" was never dull, though other journals might be as dry as a bundle of Congressional records.

The editor wisely argued that the average

public who bought papers wanted to be stirred up. Having tasted blood one day, they were not to be put off with tea and toast the next. To keep up a daily supply of sensations was therefore his life's ambition. The means employed were not always the most honorable; but since the readers were satisfied, who should find fault? Was it any one's business if the man who swore to the circulation had been indicted seventeen times for perjury, or that the ragpickers of the city were paid a liberal price per pound for all the torn letters they found in ash-barrels during the course of their pregrinations?

If a man contemplated suicide, he might turn it to profitable account for his family by choosing the most sensational means, and writing it up previously for the paper. "The Evening Owl" would publish a full account with many illustrations ten minutes after the tragedy occurred, and a handsome check would be forwarded to the bereaved family by the next mail. Indirectly in this way the journal did a great deal of good.

Suppose you wished to elope with a rich man's daughter, and did not have the money to pay the railroad fares to the next station. It would be only necessary to call on the editor of "The Evening Owl" to perfect arrangements. All that was required on your part was to conduct the elopement in a newsy way, after a plan suggested by the editor. Get married in a balloon or on the Brooklyn Bridge, or bear her away on a bicycle pursued by the irate father. You might make your choice how it was to be managed, and the paper would come down handsomely for the expenses.

If your wife ran away and you were anxious to get her back, "The Evening Owl" would provide means for pursuit, provided you were confidential regarding the circumstances.

So devoted were the stockholders to the interests of their paper that in times of trouble, or when there was a drouth of news, they did not hesitate to trot out some of their own family skeletons for the public view. Lemuel J. Rigwood would not now be lingering in

duration vile if he had not stopped on his way to Canada to pen a graphic account of his defalcations for the paper in which he was a shareholder. Nor would Barney Blaherty be now under sentence of death if, while cutting up his wife, he had not paused to take her portrait with a Kodak camera for the last edition.

With such a band of devoted adherents it was not to be wondered at that "The Evening Owl" should be such a financial success, but a large sum of money was spent yearly in keeping the staff out of reach of the strong arm of the law.

Such was the paper and its policy up to the morning that Nita, still irritated in mind, entered the office to take editorial charge.

Now at last she would have an opportunity to give vent to her pent-up ideas. Now was the golden chance to show that scoffer at home what a woman can do to create a great paper.

But the bare room, filled with dusty files, and the long line of men in their shirt sleeves smoking and expectorating copiously, rather

dampened her ardor as she made her way to the office in the corner, separated from the main room by a board partition.

Nita sat down at the desk and commenced listlessly to open the pile of letters that lay there. She could not banish from her mind the thought that Vaness was probably now reclining on that soft sofa in the corner of the parlor, reading the fascinating novel that she was just dying to finish.

And then that pink supper at five, with eight giddy girls grouped about the board! She could see in fancy Miss Olcott on the right ogling over her glass of wine, and a golden-haired creature on the left to whom he was paying assiduous attentions. Oh, she hated them all! How little did she think when inviting that set of flighty young women, that Arthur would be the one to entertain them, and alone! Oh, that was the most terrible thought of all—alone!

Well, anyway he was likely to hear himself criticised: perhaps that would interfere somewhat with his entertainment and diges-

tion. In order to smother her thoughts Nita went to work at the pile of letters. The presence of the typewriter, a young lady with abnormally black eyes and champagne-colored hair, did not add to her equanimity. It seemed to her that that offensive person was staring at her very curiously.

"Have you no work to do?" asked Nita, irritably.

"I'm waiting for the correspondence," eyeing a large diamond ring on her finger with an air of satisfaction.

"Well, I—I'm not ready yet. Go out and get your lunch and come back."

"Why, it's only ten o'clock," protested the blonde head.

"Well, then, walk around the block, or sit down in the park for half an hour. Don't you see I'm nervous this morning?"

"I guess you was out late last night," said the typewriter, with a giggle. "I was to the ball of the Gentlemen's Sons of the Fourth Ward. Mr. Skewey has written a notice of it for to-day's paper."

"It shall not appear," said Nita, decidedly. "I'm not going to conduct this paper in the interest of the Fourth Ward. That's not society news."

"Well," said the typewriter very much hurt, "if you can afford to offend Alderman Dooley, the president, by slighting his ball it's not my fault. You remember he went bail for your police reporter when he came near getting jugged last week."

"Jugged? Jugged?" said Nita. "What on earth is jugged?"

"Why, put in jail for being found in the chimney of the Gotham Hotel, taking notes, while the mill-owners were holding a private meeting. You know?"

"Oh, yes, now I remember," faintly. "Well, let the notice of the ball go in," with a sigh; "and just say to Mr. Skewey if he is outside that I will see him later about the society column."

"You'd better not ruffle the Guv'nor this morning," said the typewriter confidentially to a red-nosed reporter as they met by the

ice-cooler. "He must have been up with those ward heelers all night, for he's mad as a setting hen."

"I don't like the looks of that girl a bit," said Nita to herself; "she has a bad face. I'll reconstruct this office on a better basis before I'm through;" and she attacked the pile of letters again. Tiring very soon of this monotonous work, she turned with a sigh to penning some editorials.

"Mr. Jowler, the sporting editor," piped the office-boy before Nita had a chance to read a line. Mr. Jowler thrust his bullet-head in the door, nodded "Mornin', old man," took a shot at the spittoon and lounged in.

He was a broad-chested giant clad in corduroys of light brindle hue, and his broad face, lit by two watery-blue eyes, was quite in tone with the startling scarlet necktie that flamed on his shirt-bosom.

He gave Nita's hand such a friendly wrench when he sat down that the tears rose involuntarily to her eyes.

"Well, have you any news?" she asked,

furtively wiping them with the corner of her handkerchief. What a very terrible person he must be to deal with! He frightened her, with his husky voice and his hands like battering-rams.

“News?” yelled Mr. Jowler, bringing down his fist with such a bang on the desk that Nita jumped in her seat.—“News, me boy? Why,——my eyes if I ever got hold of such a story since I’ve been on the paper! And it’s dead straight too. What’s the matter? Got the ear-ache?” as Nita lifted her hands with a shudder at his profanity.

“Here, take a pull at this; you’ll feel better,” slapping down a huge pocket-flask on the desk. “Well, I wan’t to tell you the story,” said Mr. Jowler, not at all hurt because she did not accept the offered refreshment. “You know Charley Dusenbury—the fellow that gets up midnight races and polo games by electric light on the ice, and such damn foolishness? Well, him and Corney Shoemacher, the millionaire’s son, gave a dinner at Torretti’s last night—see?”

"Yes," said Nita, faintly.

"Well after they stacked their wittals and was feelin' pretty good—you know, you bin there," with a chuckle and a dig in the ribs that nearly knocked the editor speechless—"what does Shoemacher do but get up an' say, 'Boys, I've got a treat for you. I've engaged a couple of pugilists for a shin-kicking contest. I never saw one myself, but they say it's thrillin'.'"

"What is a shin-kicking contest?" asked Nita, huskily.

"Oh, it's very excitin'," explained Mr. Jowler. "You get two plug-uglies——"

"Plug-uglies?"

"I mean pugilists—it's all the same thing. And they kick at each other's shins till one of 'em gets knocked out."

"Oh!"

"Well," said Mr. Jowler, warming up with enthusiasm, "when he done talkin', the door opened and in walks 'Lop-eared Mike,' and 'brindle Mickey, the Lancashire Spider.' It was the loveliest scrap I ever seen, and them

dudes cheered as if they would bust, and Shoemacher he took his diamond pin out of his bosom and gave it to Lop-eared Mike, who was the winner. It'll just make a splendid story, 'cause the audience was all tony people. It'll make a column with cuts, and all the sports in town'l want a paper."

Nita looked around the room, and then at the burly figure in the chair, and ventured uneasily, but with a show of determination:

"I think, Mr. Jowler, that it must have been a very brutal exhibition, and unworthy to be recorded in the columns of a family newspaper. You should confine your articles entirely to gentlemanly sports."

"What!" howled Mr. Jowler, half-rising out of his seat, while his face assumed an even ruddier hue than his necktie, "do you mean to say you ain't going to publish this beautiful story it took me all night to get on to?"

Nita withered before his glance, and took refuge behind the blank-book in which she had gathered some notes respecting the policy of a great newspaper.

"I am convinced," she said, in a very faint voice, "that a paper should be free from all accounts calculated to debase or barbarize the minds of its readers. Physical development and a love of open-air recreation should be cultivated in the columns devoted to sport, without catering to the brutal forces that are latent in human nature."

During this peroration, Mr. Jowler folded his hands and listened with mouth wide open.

"Say," he remarked, lighting a very bad cigar, "are you reading one of them tracts that come in by every mail, or don't you feel well this morning?"

"Nothing of the kind, Mr. Jowler; but I have decided to change the character of 'The Evening Owl.' An editor's first duty should be to elevate his journal's tone."

"I thought it was to elevate the circulation," growled Mr. Jowler.

"In your department you should discourage exhibitions of brute force as much as possible, at the same time encouraging such healthy recreations as lawn-tennis—"

“Lawn-tennis!” cried Jowler, as if the very word pained him to utter it.

“Or croquet,” said Nita, blandly.

“Croquet!” he moaned, looking at his big hands lovingly. “Wants me to devote my attention to croquet—me, ‘Rastus Jowler, that was trainer for ‘The Mouse’ and ‘Humpy Loo,’ the Boston Boy. You’ll be wantin’ me to be playin’ that type-writer the next thing.” He sat in moody silence for a moment, and then brought his fist down on the desk with a bang that upset the inkstand.

“I don’t know whether you’re foolin’ or not, Vaness, but that story’s got to go in the paper; now you hear me! I told some of the sports to look out for some lively news in ‘The Owl’ to-day, and I ain’t goin’ to be made a fool of for you or no other editor. Nice way to treat a man who saved you from a horsewhippen’ only last week in front of the Astor House. I’ve got a contract to run the sports of this paper for a year yet, and I’m going to do it. If that story don’t appear, I’ll clean out the office, and there won’t be any paper at all to-day.”

Nita shivered as she surveyed the giant, and referred to her book; but it contained no advice suitable to the occasion. The cloud of smoke that wreathed Mr. Jowler's massive features gave him the appearance of some terrible genie; it was certainly the best policy to mollify him.

"Well, we won't try to change the sporting columns right away," she ventured, timidly. "That may take some time--"

"Ah! I thought you was only foolin'," smiled Mr. Jowler. "I knowed it," crushing her hand in a mighty grip. "One of your jokes, I suppose. Well, I guess I'll go and write my story up," aiming a shot at the cuspidor. "I want it for the first edition, or some of the boys on the other papers may get hold of it. So-long!" lounging towards the door. He went out chuckling to himself, "Wanted me to write up croquet!" shaking his huge shoulders. "Wanted me to write up croquet!" And she could still hear him laughing as he made his way down the room.

Nita looked at the cloud of smoke he had

left in his wake, at the impress of his huge figure on the cushions of the chair, and sighed long and deeply. "What a very terrible person!" she murmured. "I see it will take some time to bring him around to my views; anyway, I have made a beginning."

She had just started again on the pile of letters, when the office-boy announced Mr. Gargoyle.

This gentleman, who wore a plaid suit of astonishing pattern, large gold eye-glasses, and a forbidding squint, sidled into a chair, after bowing brusquely to the chief.

"You have seen the papers this morning?" he asked in a sharp voice.

"Of—of—course," said Nita, who had glanced over one journal on the way downtown.

"Well, then you know that 'The Blonde Brigand' was a complete failure at the Fourth Avenue Theatre last night."

"I saw something of the kind."

"It is to our interest, however, to let them

down easy. The manager has doubled his advertising space this week, and the leading lady has promised us an exclusive story if we write her up. Her husband has followed her on from the West, and will sit in a box every night heavily armed. He has no intention of shooting; but after we publish an account of the scandal, everybody will crowd to the theatre in the hope that he will pink his wife when she comes on the stage. There is no quarrel between them, you know, but the husband, as a man of business, wants to give his wife a boom, and no cheaper way could be found to advertise her."

Nita would have interrupted, but her voluble visitor left her no opportunity to reply.

"Miss Caramel, of the Folly Theatre, offers us the exclusive right to the story that she is to be waylaid and robbed in the cathedral. Offer refused. Public would be sure to suspect something fishy. 'Nother actress wishes to get robbed of her diamonds in some dramatic manner. Offer also refused. Game played out."

Mr. Gargoyle referred thoughtfully to his notes.

"Ah, Yes. New play at the Odeon. Same manager that refused your drama last year, you remember. I'll tear the piece to tatters and have a fling at the manager, with some side remarks about the theatre being unsafe and a general warning to the public. Oh, you leave it to me to fix him!" chuckled Mr. Gargoyle. "It's just nuts to me to go for these fellows."

"But was the new play bad?" asked Nita, referring to her blank-book.

"Bad? No. One of the best this year; but that don't matter. You leave it to me to pick holes in the production—that's all," with a knowing leer.

"But is it right, out of a spirit of revenge to condemn a play?"

"Eh, what's that?" pricking up his long ears. "Why, the last orders I had from you since the day your drama was returned was to hammer 'em. Those were the identical words you used—'Hammer 'em'—and I have

been making it precious hot for them ever since," grinning.

"I am afraid this paper needs moral reconstruction," said Nita.

"Moral nuthin'," said Mr. Gargoyle, bluntly. "It's making lots of money."

"But that is not everything," referring to the blank-book. "The stage has come to be a great public educator, and it should be the mission of the dramatic critic to encourage and popularize that which is best in stage literature. What do you intend to give us as the leader in your department to-day?"

"Well, I've got three ready, and you can take your choice. There's 'Toes and Tights,' with illustrations of the legs of queens of the burlesque and diagrams of their feet—a very interesting article that will please the men. Then I have another graphic description of 'Actresses Bathing,' with views of each lady disporting in her tub at home. That's a corker?" rubbing his hands enthusiastically. "The other paper is called 'Confessions of a

Soubrette,' gathered from experiences of some of my friends on the stage."

"And nothing on dramatic literature—the advancement of the stage?" moaned Nita, clasping her hands with a gesture of sadness.

"What's the use of such stuff in a popular paper?" said Gargoyle, bluntly. "Who's goin' to read it? What they want to know is what actors and actresses eat and drink and smoke; if they fight with their husbands and wives; what colored stockings Miss Montrose prefers; and who the mysterious lady is that carries Mr. Marmaduke away in a cab after the show."

"But you have an opportunity, when there is a revival of the Shakesperian and Elizabethian drama, to encourage it, to show the public its beauties, and slowly inculcate in them a desire for the best dramatic literature?"

"Perhaps," said Mr. Gargoyle.

"Now there was a production of 'Cymbeline' last night. Give an elaborate analysis of the performance; the history of the first

productions in England; anecdotes of the company who performed it."

"You have changed your opinions decidedly, Mr. Vaness, since last week," ventured Gargoyle, mildly.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, as the Temple Theatre has a stock company that never gets talked about, and its members are painfully respectable, you instructed me only to give a few lines to the productions of that house."

"Well, oblige me in the future by paying more attention to the classic drama. Write a strong leading article on this production."

"I can't very well."

"Why not?"

"Well, because I sent the office-boy."

"Oh!"

She would have said more if another visitor had not been announced at that moment. Mr. Gargoyle, surprised at the turn the conversation had taken, managed to escape during this moment of hesitation.

The new arrival was not of prepossessing

appearance. He had a long pink face framed in sandy whiskers, and a striped suit of clothes that hung in disordered folds on his bony frame. He was chewing the end of a cigar, and swaggered in with an assuring grin on his face.

"Say, are you the editor?" he asked, plumping into the nearest chair.

"Yes," said Nita.

"I'm Boodleby," he remarked, with that confidential grin.

"Well, what of it?" said Nita, slightly irritated.

The visitor was disappointed at the lack of enthusiasm his presence produced.

"Why you don't seem to remember me. You wrote me up in this here paper only a few weeks ago. Don't you remember when Judge Nixon's wife o' Slagtown, eloped with a tall, handsome stranger?" pulling his stubby whiskers with caressing fingers.

"Yes, I remember the incident."

"Well, I was the 'tall handsome stranger,' as you put it in the paper. The identical

individdle that bore off the Judge's wife."

"No!" echoed Nita, incredulously.

"Yes," he said. "I don't know what there is about me that always fetches the women. Lor' bless you, I don't go out of the way to fascinate 'em; all I got to do is to stand under a family tree, and they just plumps down into my arms like so many ripe plums."

"Well, I don't see what your personal charms have got to do with me or 'The Evening Owl,'" said Nita, freezingly.

"Well, that's just what I came here to explain," remarked the stranger. "I know there must be lots of men who would like to get rid of their wives, only they don't know how to go about it. Well, I propose to make arrangements with this paper to conduct the elopement department. You get exclusive stories, and I get all the glory. It's easy enough to find out when a couple don't get along well together, and, after sizing up the female, I can charm her away in a few weeks. I dare say there's lots o' husbands who would be willin' to come down handsome

to get rid of their wives without the trouble of payin' for evidence in a divorce suit. What do you say? I'll begin to-morrow, if you say so, and give you a sensation for next Tuesday's paper."

"You mistake Mr. Boodleby, I am afraid, the object of a great newspaper. Its mission is, not to encourage scandal, but to suppress it."

"Oh! thats new to me."

"'The daily journal should be a reflex of all that is noblest in life, that its readers may be lifted up to higher things, and learn the sacred character of their mission in the world,'" reading from her blank-book.

Mr. Boodleby looked around the room, and then at Nita, with astonishment.

"Say," he remarked with a drawl, "are you sure I didn't stray into the Methody Book Concern by mistake, instead of the office of 'The Evening Owl'?" shifting around in his chair uneasily.

"No mistake whatever. This is the office of the paper.

“Well, I’m d——d!” in a hoarse whisper.
“And you don’t want my services to work up sensations? You don’t need me as elopement editor?”

“I am sorry to say I must decline your services.”

“Well, he said, gathering himself together with an effort, “it ain’t my fault if you starve your readers, when you got a good chance to stir ’em up. I dare say I won’t be long out of an engagement.”

He lounged towards the door, and then turned towards Nita and eyed her a moment critically.

“Say, are you married?”

“Well—yes.”

“Perhaps you might need my services some day, in case you wanted to get rid of your wife.”

“Sir!” indignantly.

“Oh, no offence. I like to oblige members of the profession Here’s my card;” and dropping a piece of pasteboard on the desk,

Mr. Boodleby, still chewing his cigar, ambled out of the room.

“Oh!” cried Nita, pressing her hands to her forehead, “are these the sort of people I must meet every day? I shall go mad in a week. My head aches already from the constant babble. The excitement of last night must have unnerved me.”

She sat there for a moment with her face buried in her hands.

“Ah! I see it all,” she said suddenly. “Out of a spirit of mean revenge, Arthur has instructed these people to come here and worry me. He wanted to disgust me with the situation on the very first day, in hopes that I would get on my knees to him and acknowledge my mistake. But I won’t give in—I won’t!” decidedly; “I will stand the siege as long as he, if I die by the way!” with a half sob.

Then her eyes fell on the clock ticking noisily on the top of the desk.

“Four o’clock,” she murmured. “All the morning gone, and so little accomplished!

Well, anyway, I have made a beginning. They must be just arriving now—Arthur and all those girls. That horrid Miss Olcott will be seated on his right, and—oh!”

The picture seemed to choke her utterance. She rose, and walked up and down the room impatiently, finally pausing in the middle of the floor.

“I—I can’t do any work,” she murmured, plaintively, “for thinking of him alone with all those girls. I know what I’ll do. I’ll stop for the day, and hurry home and surprise them. Yes, if the paper never comes out. There!” dashing a tear out of her eye; “I’ll—”

“Mr. Miggins,” announced the office-boy, ushering in a scraggy young man with flaming red whiskers, who looked at Nita, a little suspiciously.

“Mr. Vaness,” he said, timidly.

“I can’t listen to you now,” dragging on a silk hat with trembling fingers. “I—I have particular business up-town, and cannot delay a minute.”

"But I have a very important story," said Mr. Miggins, "that won't keep. If it appears in the first edition, we shall be ahead of all the other papers."

"Very well, very well. Write it up and send it downstairs. Now go! I have not a moment to spare," dragging the stovepipe down over her ears.

Mr. Miggins departed with a smiling face.

"Are the letters ready to be answered?" asked the offensive type-writer, sticking her nose in the door.

"No—yes—that is, no," stammered Nita; "you will have to answer them as you see fit. Take them to the city editor. I have a very important engagement that I must keep," hurrying towards the door.

"Is that story of Mr. Miggins's to go in?" bawled a voice over the partition.

"Certainly," answered Nita.

"But—"

"Go and do as I say, and don't keep me waiting."

Some growling was heard from without, and then silence.

"Mr. Skewey, the society editor, would like to see you," put in the office-boy.

"I won't see anybody. Get out!" exclaimed Nita; and thrusting her hat over her eyes she rushed out of the room.

"Well, did you ever see such a roaring tornado?" remarked the type-writer. "He give me quite a turn. I wonder what's up?"

"Some woman, I'll bet," said the dramatic editor. "You should have heard him lecturing me about the dignity of my position! Of course I am not going to pay any attention. Had your lunch, Miss Holloway?"

"Not yet."

"Well come out with me, and then we'll take in a matinée."

V

GREAT TRIBULATIONS.

Vaness settled himself on the sofa, with a novel, for a long, lazy read. He had hardly finished the first page, however, when the cook entered, a formidable-looking party with red hair and a stormy eye. She was dressed, evidently for a holiday, in a green dress spangled with daisies, and a pink bonnet covered with large blue roses.

"I thought, mum, I'd drop in an' tell yez I wuz goin' for the day," she said with a courtesy.

"Going for the day!" murmured Vaness, aghast. "But you can't, Mary; I'm going to have company."

“Faix, yez told me only yesterday that I might go to Weehawken, to see me brother Dinny, that got hurted in the brick-yard. Is it a liar ye’re tryin’ to make me out, mum?” taking a firmer hold on her umbrella.

“No—o,” stammered the other, appalled at the glare in these awful eyes: “But really —”

“Faix, I haven’t had a blessed day off since Chewsday, an’ me workin’ me knuckles to the marrer noight an’ day, wid the wash big enough for a regiment, an’ Mr. Vaness comin’ in for somethin’ to ate at two of a mornin’. There’s work enough for two gerls here, let alone one, in a kitchen that I wouldn’t bury a cat in, an’ the gaspipes leakin’ so I ain’t got any shmell left in me nose at all, at all; and a shtove that smokes so I can’t tell whether I’m cuckin’ pig’s feet or biled inions! No lady’d stand it for tin minutes but me, that has such a gentle-loike dishposition. An’ now yez object to for me takin’ a few hours off for me health, when it’s to the mountains I ought to go or the sayshore, at your own

expinse, for breaking down my constitootion. Shure, when yez wanted to go off for an afternoon, wasn't I always ready to oblige yez like a lady by stayin' at home—eh?" with another glare.

"Yes, yes. I—I believe you were," retreating behind the novel, with a shiver.

"Ah! ye'll go a good ways to find another gerl as conshidarate as me," wagging her head.

Vaness thought it best at this moment to assert his authority.

"Well, you can't go, Mary; so that settles it. I expect company, and you must be here to prepare the supper."

The cook took a still firmer hand on her umbrella, as if she intended to use it.

"And I'm to have company of my own, if ye plaze, an' quite as important as thim dudes an' shtuck-oop things I've had to cuck for this mony a day. Often have I been timpted to to drop a sup o' pizen in their vittles, bad cess to 'em!—and it 'ud be a good thing for the warld, I'm thinkin', if they wuz out of it.

Well, divil a hand will I lay to a pot or pan the day, after spindin' two hours on me toilet. Yez can cuck for yer company yerself; an' if they don't doi av the efficts, may I never live to see another Sint Pathrick's Day!"

"Mary, I will not have another word. You are a very impudent creature."

"So it's a quarrel ye'd like to pick wid me, eh?" resting her hands on her hips. "Well, yez can save your breath, for I've made up me moind that this house wasn't ilegand enough for a lady of moy talents for some time. Me friends have often said it's a shame for a foine gerl like me to be wastin' me life slavin' for common people that don't know how to trate a guest. An' instead of thankin me for puttin' up wid yer didoes, I'm trated like a common manial. Yez ought to get a Chinaiser, or one o' thim Eyetalian divils, bad luck to 'em! For it's not fur a lady like meself to be livin' in a bedroom like a cupboard, that narrer I have to put me fate out the windy whin I want to go to sleep--"

"Mary, you are very impudent. Come around for your wages to-morrow. I will not have any more of your insolence," said Vaness.

Miss Flaherty sniffed scornfully, and brought her umbrella down on the floor with such a bang that the lady on the sofa jumped with apprehension.

"Oh, I know the reshpic that's due one lady to another, more perhaps than thim that sets themselves up to be me betters, though by what right they do it I don't know, for I never knew of a family being supported by the stub of a pencil that ever come to any good at all, at all. It shtands to raison that there must be somethin' crucked, so it's a gud thing I'm goin' before I'm dragged into court an' get sentenced for an aliboy."

"Will you go?" howled Vaness.

"Oh," I'm going; don't excite yourself," said Miss Flaherty, with offended dignity. "Wudyez like to go through me trunk to say if I've carried off any of yer'spoons, though divil a one in the place is worth carryin' off, for

they're all plated, the first I ever ate off of in me born days since I took sarvice. I don't wonder yez'll feel relaved gettin' me out of the way, for it's embarassin' to have yer guests takin' me always for the lady o' the house, an' the master makin' eyes at me that hard that if I hadn't been an honest gerl an' known me place—"

This time Vaness rose in a rage, and taking Miss Flaherty by the shoulders, pushed her forcibly out of the room and locked the door behind her.

Then he sank down on the sofa bathed in perspiration and gasping heavily. Miss Flaherty could still be heard mumbling outside; but as he did not answer, she finally walked across the hall and went out the street door, banging it heavily behind her.

"Ah," he sighed, with relief, "at least I've got rid of that ogress, I thought she was going to stay here all morning. A pleasant outlook for my little company! No cook and nothing to eat in the house. I shall have to get a caterer to send in the supper," wiping

his brow with a trembling hand. "I feel exhausted already, and I expected to have such a quiet morning."

He settled himself back among the cushions, and began to read again, soon absorbed in the interest of the story.

"Ting-a-ling-a-ling!" went the door bell, Vaness continued to read on.

"Ting-a-ling-a-ling-a-ling!"

"Oh dash that bell!" jumping up angrily. Then he remembered that the cook was out and that the maid had been discharged.

With a groan and a face flushed with anger, Vaness obeyed the summons.

His frown changed to a sunny smile as his eyes met those of a charming girl who tripped lightly over the threshold and kissed him noisily on both cheeks. The flush of anger was supplanted by a rosy blush at this juncture, but, strangely, he did not find the attack as unpleasant as it was unexpected.

"I dare say you did not think I should be around so early" chirped the fair visitor, putting her arm around his waist familiarly as

they passed into the parlor. "But I just received this dress from Madame Fogarty's and I knew you were just dying to see it. Isn't it just too lovely for anything?" and she sidled up to the pier glass turning and twisting and shaking out the tournure to display the costume to an advantage. "Pa growled awfully about the bill, but then he always does. Don't it become me beautifully?"

"You look charming in it," unable to resist the temptation of smoothing out the sleeves and arranging the collar about the firm white throat with his own hands.

"I think there is too much tournure, don't you?" asked Miss Olcott, trying to get a back view of herself by looking over her shoulder.

"Eh, what's that?" asked Vaness slightly puzzled.

"Too much tournure. It may be the fashion but I don't believe in going about looking like a female centaur. Wouldn't you have it taken in a little?"

"What in thunder is she talking about?" he asked himself. Then aloud, "yes—yes,

but I dare say that after you have worn it awhile you will sort o'—sort o' grow into it."

Miss Olcott looked at him somewhat in surprise but did not reply at once.

"I think those plastrons are just too sweet," she murmured. "And those tiny reverses down the front. How are you going to have the front of your dress made?" turning towards him quickly.

"I haven't made up my mind," he stammered, reddening. "Possibly with Irish pipings, a fluted apron and a shirred seam," trying to look as if he was high up in dress-making.

"Irish pipings—fluted apron and shirred seam?"

"That's it—and a bouffant waist and retroussé collar."

"Why I never heard of such things," aghast.

"Possibly not. My dress-maker is just from Paris and brought a lot of new ideas along with her."

"Well I shan't get Madame Fogarty to

make me anything more—she's behind the age. Just to think I haven't any bouffant waist or retroussé collar or any of the things you mentioned. I've a good mind to send this dress back and tell her I don't want the nasty old-fashioned thing."

Miss Olcott stamped her foot and looked ready to cry.

"Never mind, my dear," said Vaness, soothingly. "You couldn't look any sweeter than you do to-day, so don't think any more about it."

It took some time for Vaness to console his fair visitor but he did not seem to mind the task a bit.

"As your other dress is an illuminated silk" said Miss Vaness, "it would be real cute to have a spanish jacket with dove-colored vest underneath. Just the thing, you know, to show off your statuesque bust."

"So it would," thoughtfully. "Really I never thought of the burst—I mean the bust, but now I come to think of it I guess I will."

"And filagree buttons of iron and gilt with

a plain skirt. Go upstairs and get the stuff, I will pin it on you just to show the effect."

"Oh, I couldn't really, I don't know where it is. It's locked up" he stammered, appalled at the thought.

"Why you are blushing like a school-girl at her first ball," cried Miss Olcott. "I only wish I could get rosy so easily, for it's very becoming. It's not much use pinching your cheeks just before you enter a room for that passes off so quickly and then it never looks like the real article. How do you manage it anyway? Teach me how; I'm afraid my blushing days are over" with a profound sigh.

"I'm afraid they are," said Vaness not thinking how uncomplimentary the speech sounded; "Oh, I've had such a time this morning with our cook, she got so impudent that finally I had to take her bodily and push her out of the house."

"Weren't you afraid? I should have been awfully. You're a plucky little thing if you do look so slight."

“ Oh, servants are easy enough to manage if you put your foot down. But come over here to the sofa and tell me what you have been about for the past week.”

“ Oh I’ve had such a narrow escape,” said Miss Olcott when they were comfortably seated, “ you know of course that I was just as good as engaged to Horace Sedger.”

“ Yes I heard a rumor to that effect, but I didn’t know it was settled.”

“ Well, the affair is off anyway. You see we heard some queer stories about him from friends in the West, but then a young man who don’t get talked about in these days don’t amount to much. Well, the other night, at Mrs. Brompton’s, I was introduced to a Mrs. Faxton, a long, snaky sort of a woman with dyed hair. Somehow the name of Mr. Sedger happened to be mentioned, and she said, ‘ oh he’s a very good sort of a fellow; I married him in ’76, but as we didn’t travel very well in double harness we got the law to cut the traces and skipped out.’ Think of that,” Miss Olcott sobbed, “ a nice story for his

fiancée to hear. And when I spoke to Horace about his marriage to this person, this lemon-colored thing, what do you suppose was his reply?"

"Can't imagine."

"He took out his note-book and said, 'Faxton? Faxton? That must have been Aline—no it was Elaine—here I have made a note of it. Yes, I believe I did marry her in '76, though I'd almost forgotten the occurrence. A very pleasant sort of a person if my memory serves me right, I advise you to cultivate her, Alice. You see, she was married to me and you never have been. You might profit by her experience,' did you ever hear of such impudence—think of the man I was engaged to standing up and telling me all that?"

"And what did you do?"

"Do? Why I walked out of the room like an injured Queen, and the next day I wrote him a letter breaking off the whole affair."

"That was right."

"But I'm not out of his toils yet—far from it. You see he wanted all his presents back

and sent an itemized bill to papa for so many carriage-rides, so many theatre tickets and so many dinners, setting down the price of each dish."

"What did your father say to that?"

"Well you know how he hates any trouble or fuss. He grumbled around and finally said Horace would probably bring suit for that bill and might win it, and as we were awfully in debt he didn't know but that I'd better marry the man and be done with it. But I won't! I won't! I won't!" stamping her foot savagely. "I don't think I shall ever get married now," she said, after a moment's thought, "it's such a terrible risk. Not one of my friends has made a success of the speculation. Just take your own case. Could any one be so miserable as you, my poor darling, chained to that unfeeling creature for life."

"You are very wrong," cried Vaness bridleing up, "I am very much in love with my husband. He is all that is kind and noble and good!"

Miss Alcott looked at her friend full in the face for a moment and then burst into a peal of laughter.

"Well I don't see what you find to laugh about," he said very much offended.

"I was only amused to think what a silly, confiding, little goose you are, my dear. Why, the very last time I saw you, you were in tears. You didn't tell me in as many words that Mr. Vaness had been brutal to you that morning but I could easily read it in your face. And so you have made up again and are as loving as two turtle doves," poking at him with the handle of her parasol in the most maddening way. "There is something I might tell you that might shake your childish trust in your husband," said Miss Alcott carelessly tracing out a pattern in the carpet with the tip of her varnished shoe, "but I won't."

"Oh, do," pleaded Vaness eagerly wondering what this vague insinuation meant.

"But it wouldn't be right," protested Miss Alcott shaking her curly head.

“Does it concern Mr. Vaness?”

“Well—slightly.”

“Then I have a right to know.”

Miss Alcott looked furtively around the room a moment and then, bending over her companion with a pitying glance, whispered, “My poor darling, I have positive proof that Mr. Vaness is attentive to another woman!”

“It’s a d— lie!” roared Vaness quite forgetting his position.

“Oh, Nita,” covering her ears with her pretty hands, “why, you said a swear word.”

“I—I forgot myself” blushing, “but it’s so very terrible what you are telling me about Mr. Vaness that I was quite unmanned—I mean unwomaned.”

“I suppose you hear your husband swear so much at home that you get used to it.”

“You are very wrong—I assure you, Olive, that Mr. Vaness never swears. His language is always refined even when he is angry.”

“That is very kind in you to condone his faults, but I know he has the reputation of being very profane.”

“Oh he has, has he?” growled Vaness to himself, “I fancy you are responsible for it, you little huzzy.”

“Not that I mind swearing,” continued the visitor, “not at all; it must be quite refreshing I should think when you are real angry. I think somebody ought to invent a Polite Profanity that the upper classes could adopt. It seems rather hard that the poor and vulgar have such a vocabulary of strong language while we have to content ourselves, when we are just burning up with rage, by exclaiming, “How very annoying,” or “Oh how very vexing.” Why, do you know that sometimes I just feel like rushing off to my rooms and having a good swear for half an hour at the top of my lungs.”

“Oh, you do, do you,” mumbled Vaness to himself. “A nice sort of person you are to be my wife’s chosen friend and acquaintance. I’ll soon freeze you out.”

Then he added aloud “But you haven’t told me how you heard of the terrible secret about my husband.”

“It came about in the queerest way,” pursued Miss Alcott glibly; “But I am glad to be able to open your eyes to the truth—you have been deceived long enough, poor dear,” stroking her friend’s hair in the most exasperating manner. “You know my brother Jim belongs to the same club as Mr. Vaness.”

“Yes, I know, the Bounders’ Club, well what of it?”

“The other night when your husband was leaving the billiard room, he dropped a piece of paper, a note, and Jim brought it home and showed it to me. I knew you wouldn’t be satisfied unless you had the most circumstantial proofs, young wives are all such geese, so I brought the letter around for your own inspection, and here it is,” drawing a piece of crumpled paper out of her bosom, “a love letter of the most ardent kind arranging for an elopement, read it,” thrusting it into her hands, “What do you think of that?”

Vaness took the paper with an expression

of doubt, but at a glance he seemed to recognize it.

“Why you infernal fool,” he blurted out, again forgetting his position, “this is a letter from a love story he was writing; this must be part of the manuscript which your brother obligingly picked up.”

“And you believe that,” incredulously.

“Why of course, don’t I know all about it.”

“That’s all the thanks I get for warning you,” exclaimed Miss Olcott, almost ready to cry and very much hurt that she had not produced the expected effect. “I might have known that you were so much in love, you’d not believe anything against your husband. Well that’s the last time I ever try to do you a kindness, Nita Vaness, there! And I don’t care if your husband runs off with a whole female seminary or the cook—And I won’t be called an infernal fool. I wonder you can speak so coarsely to a lady; but I suppose you pick up such bad habits from that brute of a husband—And I don’t want any of your nasty pink supper—And I shan’t speak to

you again, for I've begun to think, with many others, that your not a proper person for me to associate with." And bubbling over with anger, Miss Olcott flounced out of the room in a whirl of silken skirts, leaving Vaness overcome on the sofa.

"Well!" he exclaimed, after she had gone out, "There's a nice sort of a friend for my wife to have, I must say. Why she'd do credit to an Academy for blackmailing in partnership with her precious brother, who goes around picking up people's papers and reading them and trying to make trouble. I think I shall start a black list of Nita's friends if Miss Olcott is a fair specimen. No wonder the poor little thing is miserable with such a confidential adviser and comforter;" and he began walking up and down in a nervous state of irritation.

Ting-a-ling-a-ling!

"Confound that bell, there it goes again—am I not to know a moment's peace," with a groan. "Give me back my old busy life in Printing House Square, and I will resign,

without a pang, this quiet existence of the home," shaking his head dolefully.

"We haven't got any cold victuals," he growled after opening the door to a seedy individual with a large mourning band on his hat and a red nose.

"I only called," said the seedy person meekly, "on a matter of business, my dear Mrs. Vaness," putting his foot, clad in rusty gaiters, across the sill, so that Arthur could not shut the door.

"Great heavens, can this be another one of my wife's friends," growled Vaness, as he reluctantly admitted this unwelcome visitor.

"I came in the interest of the cause," murmured the red nosed man, as he seated himself on the edge of a chair with his hat between his legs.

"What do you mean by the cause?" asked Vaness bluntly.

"Surely, my dear madam, you have attended enough of our meetings to understand the purport of my words. Have you not yourself spoken eloquently in the interests

of the Society for the Promotion of Female Freedom?"

"Never opened my mouth on the subject," said Vaness freezingly, resolved at one blow to sever Nita's connection with her club. "Old man, you have been drinking—I am utterly opposed to your Society, root and branch. It ought to be suppressed by the police. It is the cause of all the divorce suits in the city. You ought to call it the Society for the Promotion of Female Suffering, for its only influence is to make women dissatisfied with their life and discontented."

"I had hoped that you would give me the subscription you had promised," murmured the seedy man timidly, drawing up his knees.

"I never promised a cent—What for, to support you in idleness? Why don't you go to work like other men, instead of hanging on to the skirts of a lot of silly women, and wheedling money out of them, which I dare say you spend in no good purpose.

"My—my—dear madam—really—"

"Shut up! I have not had my say. If

you had come to me for money to suppress this Society, you should have it freely, though I would rather trust it to better hands. Go home and try and make an honest living, if you know how and don't play the bunko steerer in respectable homes or you will get me in trouble."

"You—you—are excited," murmured the red nosed man, tremulously; "per—haps I had better call another day," edging towards the door.

"If you do, you will not find me as good natured as I am this morning. There, you've dropped your lunch out of your hat," as a parcel fell out of the stovepipe in his hasty exit.

"Perhaps I have made a mistake in the house," looking around him very much bewildered.

"I think you have. I suppose it was East instead of West, that you were looking for. Good morning!" and the missionary was hurried through the door, which slammed behind him.

“Ah!” gasped Vaness faintly, as he sank down in a huddled heap on the sofa, “I got rid of him easily, and I fancy Nita will meet with a cold reception if she ever visits the Female Freedom party again with her proper spirit. My morning has not been altogether spent in vain. I have cut one unworthy friend off her list of acquaintances and routed a whole army of parasites that made her unhappy. But mercy! it is already two o’clock, and I have not even ordered the supper or made any preparations, and I’ve got to dress myself *alone!*” with a shudder.

A three-volume novel might be written about the trials and tribulations of Vaness on that dreadful day. It would appear that all the tradesmen and peddlers in the city had conspired to make his life miserable. They assailed the house at the front door, at the back door. The bell kept ringing as if the devil himself were dancing on the wire. And every time Vaness answered, he came up more dishevelled and furious and profane than before, until the butcher and the baker

and the candlestick-maker made up their minds and told their neighbors that Mrs. Vaness was insane; and, by evening, people sped timorously by the house, or chose to take another street for fear of a sudden outburst of the maniac.

It was three o'clock before the agony of perfecting his toilet had been accomplished. And when, heated, furious, and excited, he sallied forth to find the caterer, the neighbors were satisfied, as they beheld this strange figure appear in the street, that the poor lady had indeed gone mad, and retreated precipitately behind their curtains.

The supper ordered, he returned almost in a fainting condition to the house, just in time to be worried by the sudden influx of seven young ladies, who gave him the headache by their constant chatter. And they looked at each other in an alarmed way at the dishevelled appearance of the hostess, and the most worldly shook their heads and said they were sorry that such a nice woman as Mrs. Vaness had taken to drink, and

expressed strong sympathy for the husband. And when the party sat down to supper, it was more blue than rosy. Each young lady seemed ill at ease, and eyed Vaness askance as if he were some dangerous animal. It was discovered also that the caterer had sent some one else's dinner, consisting of pig's feet and chocolate éclairs, which did not add to the gaiety of the assembly, who had expected something delightful, and had dressed elaborately for the occasion.

So the funereal meal was hardly touched, and the young ladies soon found various excuses to depart after it was over.

And when the last skirt had fluttered through the doorway, Vaness rose fainting from the sofa and stormed the buffet, and broke open the doors, and drew forth a box of cigars and a bottle of Hennessy, and sat down amid the ruins of the repast with his feet cocked up on a chair in the most unlady-like attitude, and smoked and groaned, and drank and groaned, and then began all over again, occasionally varying the monotony by

cursing Uncle Oliver and the day he made that bargain in souls.

Then like a knell of doom he heard the cry in the street:

“Las’ edition—‘Sun’—‘World’—‘News’—
‘Owl.’ Las’ edition!”

Why did a sudden chill strike his heart as he rushed to the door, bought a paper, and returned to the sofa?

VI

IN PERIL

A moment later, Nita, flushed with her rapid walk, hastily entered the room. Vaness was stretched out on the sofa, speechless.

"Why, Arthur, dear, what is the matter?" she murmured, kneeling down by his side, alarmed at the apoplectic color of his face and heavy breathing.

"The paper—the paper," he gasped, shaking a damp newspaper in front of her face. Then he turned toward the wall and groaned.

"What can the matter be?" Nita asked herself, in an agony of alarm. "Something dreadful has occurred, I am certain. Is—is

mamma dead? Tell me, tell me," shaking him vigorously by the arm.

"Worse—much worse," he moaned, his voice sinking almost to a whisper.

Nita hurried over to the table and poured out a glass of wine. Her hand was trembling so violently that she spilt most of the contents over his face when she raised it to his lips. He choked and spluttered, but what he swallowed seemed to revive him. He sat up on the edge of the sofa and glared at her wildly.

"Go away, miserable creature!" he cried. "Bury yourself in the woods or some corner of the earth where you will be forgotten, and let me toil out my miserable days alone," mopping his face and forehead with a scarlet handkerchief, while he groaned an accompaniment. Suddenly he started up wildly.

"What is it, Arthur?" she asked, imploringly.

"What is it? You ask me that question?" with a stony glare. "Look at that paper!"

he howled, holding up the copy of "The Evening Owl." "Look at that paper!"

"I—I see it," murmured Nita, plaintively.

"Read it, unhappy creature!" thrusting the sheet into her frightened face. "Gaze upon the ruin you have wrought!" sinking back on the sofa. "Unlucky was the day when you started to revolutionize the press!"

"Why—why—what's the matter, Arthur dear? Isn't it all right? I'm sure I spent all day in that nasty, dirty office, working like a galley-slave."

"Unhappy creature," he moaned, "you have ruined me forever! Never shall I be able to hold up my head among my fellow-men again. You have made me the laughing-stock of the town." Then he snatched up the paper and said, "Listen; this must be some of your brilliant work; listen:

"A few moments before going to press we have received information regarding a new scandal which implicates some well-known people. The principal in this unfortunate affair is the editor of a disreputable evening

paper whose symbol is the bird of wisdom, but should have been a carrion crow. This journalist, who has long disgraced his guild, has accumulated a handsome fortune through bribery and corruption, and now contemplates flight from this city with his ill-gotten gains, to escape the just penalty of his numerous crimes against law and society.

“‘This alleged journalist resides in a handsome house in Thirty-fourth Street, between Seventh and Eighth avenues.’ You heard that?” howled Vaness--“‘between Seventh and Eighth avenues.’ That is this house--this house ; and I—I am the unhappy individual singled out for attack in my own paper !”

He retreated behind the journal and groaned loud and long.

“But that is not all,” starting up with angry energy. “The worst is yet to come. My cup is brimmed with more bitterness. I must quaff still more gall and wormwood. Listen !

“‘This vampire, who has sapped the life-

blood of his patrons, who has fed like a ghoul on the bodies of the unfortunates slain by his pen—this assassin of truth and justice, with the Janus face, as a final act of villainy intends to desert his charming wife, the daughter of one of our most respected citizens. This unfortunate lady, who three years ago fell under the spell of this designing ruffian may at least be congratulated that she will be freed from the tyranny of one who has long ago forfeited all claims as a husband. From authentic sources we learn that the leading danseuse of a Bowery theatre is to accompany the recreant husband across the border, leaving behind her three divorced husbands and six twins. The sympathies of the entire public will be with the wife of this bravo of the pen, and yet it is a merciful relief that she will be freed at last from the daily insults of a degraded debauchee.'

"Now, what do you think of that?" cried Vaness. "What—do—you—think—of that? Could anything be plainer? *I* am the de-

graded debauchee, and you—you, the cause of this awful article, you are the lovely and deserted wife. Oh, I shall certainly go mad!" waving his arms frantically in the air. "But the worst of it all is that this terrible tale appears in my own paper—my own paper!" sinking, with many moans, a helpless heap among the cushions.

As for Nita, her words entirely failed her. She could only sit there holding the copy of "The Evening Owl" in her trembling hand, speechless with dismay, while a large tear trickled down her cheek.

"Why, Arthur, I—I didn't know anything about this—awful article. Indeed I didn't," very plaintively.

"Didn't know about it!" he groaned. "Is that any excuse? It was your business to keep such things out of the paper. That's what an editor's for. How can I sue my own paper for libel? Nobody ever heard of such a thing. Who was the wretch that perpetrated that paragraph? Tell me! I shall not be able to sleep comfortably to-night until

he is done away with. Tell me his unholy name."

"I don't know. I—I didn't wait until the paper came out. The sound of those horrid presses clanking in the basement gave me a headache."

"But whom do you suspect? Whom have you spoken with to-day in the office?"

"Well, there was the sporting editor a—a very horrid person," with a shudder of reminiscence, "and the dramatic editor--and—"

"But the reporters?"

"Oh, just as I was going away a young man entered in a great hurry. He said he had brought a very interesting story, and so I told him to write it up and send it down to the composing room."

"Was he red-headed, with a long pink face?"

"Ye—es."

"And wore gaiters with plaid tops?"

"I—I believe he did."

"Oh!" groaned Vaness, burying his face in his hands. "It must have been Miggins."

I was going to discharge him to-morrow. He must have got wind of the fact, and took this opportunity of being revenged. Miserable woman, you have made me absurd. All the papers will be laughing over this to-morrow."

Nita in vain tried to console him. Her tears made no impression on the fire of his anger. Suddenly he sat up and took the offending sheet again in his hands.

"I may as well know the worst first as last," he sighed. "Let me see what further destruction you have wrought this melancholy day. Why did I ever allow myself to be persuaded into making such a bargain? Why, we shall be in jail before the week's out, if things continue at this rate. Ah! here is an editorial paragraph that bears the stamp of your genius. I am almost afraid to read it, for no doubt some deadly peril for us both lurks in every line. Ha! ha!" with a wild laugh. "I thought so.

" "We can not find enough censure for the Mayor having allowed such a disorderly rab-

ble to assemble in Union Square last night, when the Socialist leader Ivan Ogereff addressed the crowd. In no other city would such a concourse of ex convicts, outcasts, and murderers be permitted to hold a public meeting. The revolutionary sentiments expressed by the Russian ruffian who presided and by his cut-throat companions were of the most inflammatory character; the speakers urging their hearers to pillage Fifth Avenue and string up the capitalist from every lamp-post. During an attempt on the part of the police to maintain order they were severely handled as they were not permitted to carry arms on this occasion. If such meetings as this are to be permitted, we demand that the police shall attend fully armed, and at the first sign of trouble from the rabble they should fire on the crowd.

“ ‘If we had our own way, prison bars should keep the leaders of the New York Socialists from attending any meetings for some time to come; and as for Ogereff, five minutes

in the electric chair would soon cure him of his oratory'”—

Vaness threw down the paper, gasped, opened his mouth to speak, but no words came from his lips. He took a glass of wine and seemed revived.

“Anything worse than that in the paper?” he howled. “Anything that will hang me or send us both up for life? If you have, trot 'em out now while I am composed,” gritting his teeth. “Not satisfied with holding your own family up to ridicule, and libelling your poor, unhappy husband, you must needs draw down on his innocent head the vengeance of the populace. We shall both be ornamenting the top of an electric light pole before the night is over. Miserable unfortunate, what possessed you to place our lives in peril?”

“I am sure,” sobbed Nita, “I only, expressed the highest sentiments,” referring to her little book. “The press should be a sturdy ally in maintaining pure government, in disseminating the true doctrine of law

and order. Its voice should be always raised against the foes of society and the misguided fanatics who sow the seeds of discord among the people. They should reap what they have sown, and those who preach the sword should die by the sword. Now you yourself have often told me that you wished that all the socialists and anarchists were driven out of the city."

"Well, I may have said so, but I didn't go so far as to express my sentiments on paper for all the world to read. Why, if you keep on you will plunge the city into a social revolution, and we shall be the first to suffer. How would you like your head, or rather the one you now wear, to adorn the top of a long pike? For heads on pikes are quite the rage during such times."

"Oh!" exclaimed Nita, shuddering at the thought, and raising one trembling hand to her face.

"It's not at all unlikely. Revolutions have begun from much slighter causes than this. I shouldn't wonder if even at this moment a

ragged mob were sacking the office of the paper and feeding the staff into the presses. Oh, you have distinguished yourself admirably for one day!" rising and walking up and down the room hurriedly. Then he stopped and picked up the offending paper again.

"But that cannot be all," severely. "You cannot have been satisfied with simply disgracing us and imperilling our lives. Why, where is the account of the Sullivan-Smith fight that was to take place this morning? I don't see a line of it—not a word, and we had two correspondents on the spot. Where is it?" thumping the paper with his fist. "Show it to me."

"I—I left it out," said Nita, almost in a whisper.

"Left it out!" he screamed, "left it out! Why? Why? It would have sold thousands of papers. Every journal will have a page about it. A crowd will be waiting in front of the bulletin-board to see the news, and there won't be a blessed word. Oh, this is too much, too much!" falling with a thud into

an arm-chair. "Why, wha—at prompted you to keep out the only valuable news-story that could be procured to-day?"

Nita was not ready just then with an answer; but having resorted to her little blank-book, her face cleared and she began to read in a composed voice:

"The press should always encourage healthful exercise and manly sports, but it should strongly condemn, under all circumstances, brutal exhibitions of animal strength, such as the prize ring, and degrading performances in which dogs and roosters are slain to please inhuman crowds.' There!" triumphantly.

"Bosh! That sounds all very well. But an editor's first duty is to build up the sale of his paper. He cannot feed a starving family on lofty sentiments; or clothe himself properly with resounding rhetoric. Here you have filled up the space that should have been allotted to the fight with a dreary account of a game of croquet. Bah!"

And he threw the paper down under foot

and trampled on it in his rage. "We shall be ruined before the week is out; I know it, I feel it," he moaned.

"But really, Arthur, I did the best I could," Nita interposed, wiping her tearful eyes. "Wait until I have reorganized the office."

"Unhappy creatures! they must be disorganized enough already. What a wretched lot is theirs! You say you have done the best you could? Do you think that the readers of 'The Owl' are to be fed on milk and mush? They have tasted blood, and their thirst is aroused. Can a tiger be satisfied with a diet of tea and toast? They ask for gore, and you smother them with a spring bonnet. They call for crime, and you gag them with the latest thing in corsets. They ask for battle, murder, and sudden death, and you stifle them with tea-parties and games of croquet. Oh, Uncle Oliver, unlucky was the day when we made this bargain in souls! Hunger and ruin will soon be our portion; we shall soon need bodies to hold

our souls," wringing his hands. "Ah! what was that?"

A murmuring sound of many voices and the tramp of feet were heard from the street. Vaness rushed to the window. He peeped out through the curtains with a vague feeling of apprehension.

"What is it?" asked Nita, anxiously.

Just then a paving-stone crashed through the panes and rolled noisily at her feet.

"That's the first reply from your friends the socialists," he said calmly. "The street is full of people, dirty and howling. As you are the author of that offensive paragraph, you had better go out on the balcony and address the crowd. Your eloquence may soothe them, but they may kill you first."

"Oh, really, I couldn't. I shouldn't know what to say," she answered from her retreat under the sofa, where she had scrambled hastily.

"You—you go. You are used to such things. They will listen to you. You are a man."

"Oh! no, I'm not; I'm a woman. They don't know me from Adam. It's you they want. Hear 'em!" and a loud roar sounded from the street, "Vaness! Vaness! Come out!"

The occupants of the drawing-room trembled. It was a moment of dread peril for them both.

"Don't you think we had better try to escape through the back way?" asked Nita. "We might climb over the wall and get into a side-street, and take refuge at mother's. If they find that no one appears, they may get tired and go away."

"Yes, after smashing everything in the house," said Vaness, looking around the charming room with a groan. "Well," after a moment's consideration, "I don't suppose anything can be gained by stopping here, and I can summon the police while we are escaping; that is, granting that we can escape, for they are furious, and may have blocked us in. Take a last look at the bric-a-brac, for when you see this house again it will be a smoking ruin."

"Oh, don't say such horrible things!" moaned his companion, looking around with a distracted air. "Don't you think we ought to try and save something?"

"Well, the piano is the most valuable thing in the parlor. You might carry that off," with grim humor.

A roar from without warned them that the mob was getting impatient.

"Come," he said, taking Nita's trembling hand in his. "Our lives are the most precious things we can save just now."

They left the room noiselessly. It was getting dark, so with difficulty they made their way down into the basement.

They wanted to tell the cook that they were going out to make a call, but they could not find her; she had disappeared.

"Oh, I forgot I turned her out," murmured Vaness to himself. "Could it be possible that she had gone over to the enemy?"

Just as they were deserting the house, another thought occurred to him, and he turned resolutely back.

"What is it now?" asked Nita, anxiously.

"I had forgotten all about Uncle Oliver."

"Oh, let him alone. They will not harm him. If we delay any longer it may be too late. Come, Arthur," dragging him away.

"What, would you leave him to his fate, after bringing down this ruffian horde about his ears? For shame! We must save him."

"And be lost ourselves?"

"If he is killed," said Vaness, "the secret of our souls will die with him. We shall never be able to break this awful bargain and be ourselves again. What a fearful future will be ours!"

"Oh!" cried Nita, with a shudder, "I never thought of that. You are right; he must be saved!" and in another moment they were bounding up the stairs towards Uncle Oliver's room with hearts beating high with excitement.

"We ought to get his life heavily insured," said thoughtful Nita, when they gained the landing. "Then, if anything happened,

we should have some money with which to console ourselves."

"Could I buy back my intellectual head and graceful form with money?" he asked bitterly; and she said no more.

They found the sage clad in his embroidered dressing-gown, working in the midst of a cloud of smoke that rose from several retorts and crucibles. There was something uncanny about his appearance as he loomed up before their eyes like a genie on a cloud. His saffron-colored hands, like the claws of a strange bird, fluttered here and there through the smoke, sprinkling powders and essences on the flames.

At his elbow Guzko stood, as silent as the brazen Buddha in the corner, ready to wait upon his master. Uncle Oliver turned angrily upon his visitors as they entered.

"Why do you come bursting into my room at such a critical moment?" he demanded angrily. "I was just in the midst of a delicate experiment."

"But, uncle, the house is besieged by an

infuriated mob. We have come to save your life. Hasten or it will be too late," said Nita.

"I never saw you so much interested in my welfare before," the old man chuckled. "Why this sudden display of affection?" and he laughed loudly, with a queer cackling noise.

"Don't delay," pleaded Nita, earnestly. "Just hear them!" as a roar sounded from below. "They are thirsting for blood."

"But where do you propose to go?" he asked, peeping cautiously out on the scene in the street.

"We thought of taking refuge with dear mamma until the trouble was over. Do hurry, for your own sake as well as ours"—in an agony of impatience.

"What? Leave this comfortable room and take up my quarters with Mrs. Sowerby? Let me die right here if that is the alternative," sinking into a chair. "Better face an army of socialists than that one woman."

"It's very cruel of you to speak so of dear mamma," said Nita, with a sob.

"Oh, you need not stay on my account," said the old man with a chuckle, as he prepared to return to his work. "I don't want to detain you for a moment."

"But we—we won't go without you."

"We—we want to save you," they quavered.

"Ha! ha! now I know the reason for your disinterested kindness, my dear children. You are afraid I may die, and the secret with me. Well, I hear them already at the door, so escape is too late. We can die here together; and though your souls have been on earth divided, they will pass unchanged to the spirit-world."

Far from comforting the unfortunate pair, this speech only added to their alarm.

"Unhappy man," cried Vaness, "we must leave you to your fate. It is too soon to give up all hope. We will try to escape. Come;" and he led his companion away. They passed quickly down the stairs, feeling their way in the dark to the basement, just as the front door burst open, and the sound of heavy boots was heard in the hall. Vaness

and his trembling companion had reached the door leading into the tiny garden none too soon. Then, as he laid his hand on the knob to turn it, a shiver of dismay ran like a chill through his heart. It was locked!

"Oh, Arthur, what is to be done?" wept Nita, clinging to his arm.

"Nothing," he muttered, hoarsely. "That door is of iron, with a spring lock. It cannot be forced. We are trapped."

Just at that moment the sound of heavy boots was heard drawing nearer their retreat.

"Vaness! Vaness!" roared several voices.

He started at the sound. "We can barricade the door leading to the hall," he muttered hastily. "Come, help me as quietly as you can. They may think we have escaped."

They piled every available piece of furniture against the door. The last piece had just been set against the panels, when the tumult was heard only a few feet away.

"Vaness! Vaness?" shouted a hoarse voice. A hand tried the knob for several moments. Then there was a sound of mut-

tered growling and the shuffling of many boots on the stairs. The marauders made no further attempt to break in, but seemed to be beating a retreat.

The fugitives breathed more freely. Vaness had found a piece of candle and lit it. Then he helped Nita out of the wash-basket of clean clothes, where she had been hiding.

"I don't think they will come back here," he said. "They will be satisfied with pillaging the house. There is nothing here worth taking."

"Oh, Arthur," said Nita, very plaintively, "can you ever forgive me for having brought all this trouble upon you?" crouching down at his side.

"My dear, there is nothing to forgive. Let us forget what is past, and think only of the common danger that threatens us. We may never escape alive. Who knows but the attack on our house was the beginning of a revolution, and that even now the city is being pillaged by the mob? At least, if we

perish, this odious bargain in souls will be broken," putting his arm tenderly around his trembling companion.

"Who could have imagined, twenty-four hours ago, that we should now be in danger of our lives?" murmured Nita. "Ah, it is a just visitation of Providence for having been discontented with our lot, for having tried to reverse the plans of our Creator."

She subsided in a huddled heap on the floor, and only an occasional sigh reminded Vaness that he had a companion. Having, to his joy, discovered a cigarette, he was calmly smoking, and thinking very hard over their unlucky predicament.

Finally, after a few moments' silence, he felt a hand plucking timidly at his sleeve.

"Arthur."

"Well?"

"You won't feel angry with me?"

"What for?"

"I—I am awfully hungry," plaintively.

"Already?" with a growl. "Why we may be blockaded here for a week. May have to

eat each other. This is only the beginning."

"But won't there be anything to eat tomorrow?"

"Dunno!"

"I might look around," said Nita, timidly; "there must be some scraps in the closet."

"Plenty of rats, I dare say."

"Ough!" with a start.

"Well, you'll be very glad to fall back on them before the week's out."

"Never! I will die first."

"Oh, you'll get to like them exceedingly. When young they are said to be quite as appetizing as rabbits. Well, we may as well amuse ourselves by looking after the provisions—that is provided there are any."

He took up the candle and made a tour of the small room, stopping to rummage every closet and corner; while Nita gave a tiny scream every now and then at an imaginary rat.

"There's plenty of water, anyway," said Vaness, turning on a pigot.

"And pepper and salt," cried Nita, drawing two large boxes out of the closet.

"I had no idea our larder was generally so empty."

"You forget that you have had seven hungry girls to supper, and did not order anything for to-morrow. When *I* managed the house it was very different."

Vaness thought best to change the conversation.

"What a pity our cat died! We might have trained her to catch sparrows for us. I have read of such things in books. Anyway, we might eat her as a last resort. If I ever get out of this predicament I shall keep a regular menagerie, just to fall back on in case of necessity."

"Here are half-a-dozen bottles of Worcestershire sauce," said Nita, dragging some bottles out of the table-drawer.

"That's good. We shall be able to make some very nice mixed drinks with those. Ah, what's this?" stumbling over something soft. "By Jove, it's a fur rug!"

"Well, what good is that? We can't eat it."

"Why not? They did in the siege of Paris. You scrape off all the hair and then boil the skin for a couple of days, and there you have a bowl of nice clear soup."

"I couldn't be tempted to touch it," shivered Nita.

"Well, considering you used to board on West Eleventh Street, I should think you would be able to eat it with relish. There's no use looking any further; we have scoured every corner and cupboard."

Just then Nita gave a joyous cry.

"Well, what is it? Have you found a Perigord pie or Westphalian ham?"

"No; a turnip. Will you have some of it?"

"Thanks; you are more hungry than I am."

Nita sat down and began munching the turnip. Never had she tasted anything so good.

They talked for a long time over their troubles, and at last nature triumphed over their fears, and they fell asleep in each

other's arms like the babes in the woods.

Daylight was filtering through a crack in the shutters when Vaness awoke and looked around him, a little alarmed at his surroundings; but the events of the night before soon recurred to him.

Nita was still sleeping peacefully on the rug he had spread out for her. He had no idea what time of the day it was, but from the sun, which he could see by peeping through the shutter, he judged it to be around eight or nine o'clock. He performed his ablutions at the sink, and then sat down to think what they should do for breakfast.

He knew that there was generally a cold lunch laid out on the top of the dining-room buffet, and the thought that it was so near, and yet impossible to reach, was maddening. The house was very still now. Could he not open the door gently, crawl upstairs, and reconnoitre while Nita slept on? It would be dangerous, but he might be able to seize a pie or something on the way, if there was no one in the dining-room.

He opened the door carefully and listened. Not a sound. Slowly the stairs were ascended, and he was in front of the dining-room door, which stood ajar. With a heart beating high with excitement, he raised himself on tiptoes and peeped in. Not a soul was visible. But what caused his eyes to glisten was the sight of a tempting breakfast laid out on the table—a pile of brown toast, an omelette, and a steaming pot of coffee. The maddening incense of the fragrant Mocha drifted towards him, and he sniffed the perfume in a state of ecstasy. He was tempted to rush in at any peril, grab the omelette and coffee, and run away to his retreat, to enjoy it with Nita. Then reason came to his aid. It would be better, after all, to be discreet. Perhaps some of those cut-throats were idling in the front parlor; they would shut off his retreat, and perhaps send him where breakfasts are not. He resolved on a piece of strategy. Right behind him on the hat-rack was a long alpenstock, the souvenir of a tramp trip he had taken through Switzer-

land. It was surmounted by a single chamois-horn, which made an admirable hook. In a moment it was in his hands. Listening to hear if anyone was stirring, he poked it in the door and began fishing for the coffee-pot. His hand was trembling so violently that it was some time before he could hook the handle of the pot with the horn. Then he raised it slowly—slowly, to draw it towards him, his face beaming with hope and expectancy.

Just as it was in reach of his hand, a voice cried out from the parlor:

“Hello! where is my breakfast going?”

The coffee-pot fell with a crash on the floor. Vaness paused in terror, unable to move hand or foot. When he looked up, he was facing, not a ragged revolutionist, but a stylish young man in brown tweeds, who was eyeing him with a smile on his handsome face.

“Follansby?” he cried. “What are you doing here?”

“And what are you doing stealing my breakfast?”

"But the mob," gasped Vaness, unable to understand the situation.

"Oh, that crowd disappeared last night quite early. You see, I was coming around to invite Vaness to dinner at the club. I saw the mob in the street, and summoned the police. It didn't take ten minutes to scatter them. The front door happened to be open, so I walked in with a couple of policemen and took possession. We stayed here all night, to protect the place in case you should return."

Vaness almost fainted in his arms, much to that young man's surprise. He had always considered his friend's wife an unapproachable woman.

"Take care; Mr. Vaness may see us," he murmured, in a discreet whisper. And as if in answer to his words, Nita's frightened eyes could be seen glaring through the doorway on the strange scene. "Come in," called Follansby, cheerily. "Now that you are both here, let me ask you to breakfast with me; that is, unless you have already had some—"

Nita waited to hear no more. The sight of that well-spread table was enough. Something—she had not the vaguest idea what—had happened, but she was too hungry to question. The breakfast was enough to think about just then.

As for Follansby, he felt relieved at the thought that he had not been seen with Mrs. Vaness in his arms. The greatest possible good-nature reigned among the party as they sat down to the table. Husband and wife had never enjoyed a meal so heartily in their lives. It was necessary for the host to send out again to the restaurant to supply his hungry guests.

“I couldn’t help thinking,” he said, “when I took up my quarters here and found nothing to eat, that the family would have a hard time in case of a siege.”

“Yes,” said Vaness, with his mouth full. “Do you know, that thought occurred to us too!”

VII

A NEW QUIXOTE

Although Nita had won her coveted freedom, she was far from happy. In spite of the wholesome meals she daily prepared for the patrons of "The Owl," there were many vacant chairs at the feast, and even those who still surrounded the board had begun to murmur at the fare provided and showed symptoms of stampeding to the caterer across the way, who served up sensations fiery hot with a curry of redundant rhetoric.

The subscription list was rapidly falling off, in spite of her well meant efforts to keep her clientele, and grumbling by letter deluged the office every morning.

When not employed at the desk, she sallied forth on long rambles in search of adventure like a Knight of old, to redress the wrongs of the weaker sex, should an opportunity offer. The result was not always satisfactory, for the giants she tried to conquer often turned out to be only windmills, and her chivalrous efforts met frequently with defeat; but still she was satisfied that the time would come when she might prove a champion of the weak and oppressed.

Meanwhile, until a really stirring adventure turned up, she was forced to content herself with small courtesies towards the oppressed sex. She rode frequently in horse cars in order to be able to give up her seat to tired working women (who did not thank her), thus disgracing the male brutes who were absorbed in the contents of their papers. She was always ready to assist tired looking women with their arms full of bundles, and once, having become separated in a crowd from an old lady whose parrot she had insisted on carrying, she was hauled off to

the nearest police station where it took all her eloquence to convince the Sergeant that she was not a sneak thief but only a journalist. Whereupon the old lady remarked that there wasn't much difference, and the parrot swore at her.

But Nita had read in books of chivalry, that Knights who went out into the world to redress wrongs must expect to meet with ingratitude and even defeat; the consciousness of having tried to do what was right should be enough satisfaction.

Her ardor in searching for opportunities to aid weak women continued unabated, for on every hand she saw fresh evidences of man's tyranny and new forms of oppression of the white slaves of society.

One day, an opportunity to be heroic arose. While passing through a quiet street, a sudden alarm of fire sounded. She ran in the direction of the smoke, her heart beating high with excitement. Already the doorways near the scene of disaster were thronged with people. Arriving before a house over which

a cloud of smoke hovered she rushed in and bounded up the stairs. She burst into the first room on the second floor, where a lady was reading a novel in bed, not at all disturbed by the presence of such terrible peril.

Nita had often read in romances that some women, when confronted with danger, grew paralyzed with fear, stupefied with despair, unable to move or even speak.

The lightly clothed young woman on the bed had evidently resigned herself to a miserable death, for she was reading out loud to herself. Undoubtedly her mind had become unsettled by the deadly peril that surrounded her, for she mumbled—

“And they laid the untutored child of nature in a sunny corner of the village church-yard, where Marmaduke often came to shower repentant tears on his lost love’s grave. Thus—”

“Rouse yourself,” cried Nita, shaking the poor creature vigorously and tearing away about half a yard of Spanish lace from the robe de nuit.

"Rouse yourself," she shouted. "In a moment, escape may be impossible. The flames are at your door."

"Eh! what's that?" remarked the young woman, looking at her sleepily. Then seeing that her visitor was a man she gave a shriek and disappeared under the bed clothes.

There was no time to be lost. Perhaps even now the staircase might be on fire. In spite of the lady's continued howls, Nita dragged her out of bed, rolled her up in the coverlet and staggered with her burden down stairs. Whether it was the smoke or the burden of bearing such a stout young person down the flight that made Nita's brain reel, she could not tell but a sense of faintness came over her before she had accomplished half her journey and then she slipped and rolled the rest of the way, in a whirl of muslin and Hamburg edging. In a moment she had regained her feet, satisfied that she had saved a life and that even now the crowd without were praying over the unconscious

form she had wrested from the devouring flames.

But there were more unfortunates above—they must be saved too. She would have been glad to have discovered a bed-ridden old lady of about ninety, some one very old and very light whom she could easily carry. Then she would stagger towards the window sill just as they do in the popular novels and stand in view of the crowd framed in fire, while a loud cheer of thanksgiving rose from the assembled multitude. Then some brave heart would place a ladder against the building and she would make her way slowly down the blazing rungs while—"God bless you" sounded in her ears from the grateful hearts below. Ah! Arthur would have reason to regret that he had ever accused her of having been faint hearted, he should learn to his discomfiture of what bravery she was capable. Already one life was saved—one soul plucked like a brand from the burning; this glorious day should not close until many more were weeping grateful tears at her feet.

All these thoughts encouraged her and strengthened her as she rushed up the stairs again on her life-saving mission—her whole heart aglow with glorious exultation. But unfortunately for her hopes every room she entered seemed to be empty. The dear old bed-ridden lady, muttering prayers, must have escaped, or she did not live there. And Nita was puzzled because all the burning houses she had ever read about contained at least one helpless old woman, and sometimes a blind father. She rather felt that she was not being squarely treated.

As she returned from the top floor after a fruitless search and with a large bump over the left eye, where she had collided with a piece of furniture, she caught sight of a flying figure in white in the dim lit hall below.

“Ah!” cried Nita, “Some poor helpless woman crazed by the sight of the flames,” and she bounded to the rescue.

“Let me save you, poor darling,” she said soothingly, clasping the bundle of white in her arms.

"But I don't want to be saved," howled the unfortunate. "I've just been saved."

"Calm yourself, dear," clasping the struggling form firmly and dragging it screaming towards the stairs, "A few moments and all will be well."

But the miserable creature continued to struggle and howl until the hallway had been reached, and Nita, in a very dismantled condition, stood panting with the excitement of the journey. Already she could feel herself clasped in the arms of a grateful father while the poor mother wept at her feet.

"There he is—there he is," cried a number of voices.

The friends were peering in the doorway to grasp her hand to tell her in a few broken words how deeply they felt their obligations for that signal act of bravery.

"What in thunder are you doing with my wife?" howled a harsh voice, and Nita suddenly felt a large and brawny hand grasp her shoulder.

It was not exactly the welcome she had expected, but doubtless the unhappy husband was excited.

“Let me restore her to your arms,” she said, lifting the limp, white burden she had dragged down that long flight of stairs. “She was crazed by the sight of the flames; she was rushing to destruction when I arrived in time to save her,” and Nita drew herself up modestly just like a hero in one of *The Duchess’s* novels.

“Are you the infernal fool that dragged me out of bed and pushed me down those stairs about ten minutes ago?” angrily demanded the lady in white who had returned to her senses.

Nita looked at the flushed face, somewhat disconcerted. Yes, it was certainly the unfortunate being whom she had found calmly reading in bed when she first set out on her mission of salvation. This complicated matters considerably. Nita had never read in any novel of the hero saving a beautiful young woman twice from the same fire, but

then it was all the more dramatic and her courage was none the less commendable.

“My poor lady, you were crazed with the danger of the moment—stupefied with despair.”

“Stupefied humbug,” retorted that ungrateful creature. “A pretty state of things when a strange man is allowed to burst into a lady’s room and drag her out of bed and push her down-stairs.”

“I’ve a good mind to give you in charge,” howled the husband, shaking a formidable fist in close proximity to Nita’s nose.

“And just when I was in the midst of a most exciting chapter of ‘The Haunted Honeymoon,’” whimpered the lady in white.

Nita was reeling with astonishment.

“But the fire,” she gasped. “I saved your wife from the flames. A moment more and she would have been reduced to cinders.”

“Humbug! there ain’t no fire,” he howled.

“No fire!”

“No! It’s back on the next street.”

Nita had made a mistake in the house.

Crushed in spirit she turned away and slunk through the crowd; and for many days after that she did not sally forth on her chivalrous errands of mercy. The most terrible thing about the whole affair was that it got into the papers and Nita was so graphically pictured by the reporters that, though no names were mentioned, those who knew the editor of "The Owl" personally had no trouble in deciding who the mysterious person was who had blundered into a peaceful house in a mistaken mission of mercy.

As for Arthur Vaness he or rather she was never tired of bringing up the painful subject. For when she started away to the office of a morning he would gravely suggest that she take with her a fire escape in case an opportunity to visit a fire should occur on the way down town; and he often asked anxiously if she had received a medal yet for her bravery in saving the same woman twice on Thirty-Fourth street.

These taunts were sufficient to stir up Nita's sensitive soul to such a pitch of desperation that she would have rushed pell-mell into any burning building that offered to retrieve her reputation. Now more ardently than ever did she pray for a chance to show her valor.

After many weary days of waiting the longed-for opportunity at last arrived.

Nita had been dining at The Bounders' Club, had played cards all the evening, and now, with a brain somewhat confused, she had wandered down to the river's edge to clear her head of the tobacco fumes that she had been breathing all the evening.

It was verging on midnight and a light mist hung over the waters and draped the shipping in soft gray folds. She sat down on a mooring-post and looked dreamily down into the black waters that laved the spiles of the dock with a soothing murmur.

She thought sadly of the life that she had led only a month ago—that quiet existence where there were few cares to worry her sensi-

tive nature, far removed from the noise of the world, where its jarring sounds only reached her ears like the wave beats of a far-off sea.

The friction of the crowds worried and irritated her; she was fast losing all the amiable qualities in her nature and becoming fretful and peevish. She had made a mistake and yet was too proud to acknowledge it. The liberty for which she had sighed had proved a delusive snare. The privilege of going to a club where cards and tobacco and drinking employed the attention of its members was no recompense for the loss of the quiet existence from which the brutal sides of life were discreetly hidden. Her new knowledge of the world as viewed from a man's standpoint only disgusted her; she would have gladly given years of her life to have been as ignorant of its mysteries as of old. She was tired already of battling in the stream and sighed again for the placid shallows. As she sat there with black care for company, the sound of a light footstep arrested her attention.

The moon had struggled through the ragged clouds, and bathed the pier in silvery light. Close to the water's edge and peering down into the black waters stood a woman. From time to time she turned her face in the direction of the street and started affrightedly as a carriage dashed along the highway.

Nita could see that she was deadly pale even in that uncertain light, and that she was handsomely dressed in some dark silk evening costume that displayed her finely moulded arms and white neck.

What could her purpose be in standing on that lonely pier at midnight. What purpose but to find death in the waters at her feet?

This was the question that Nita asked herself and answered. Here was an opportunity to save a woman weary of the world who sought in death the rest that had been denied her in life.

It should be Nita's task not only to save this despairing soul but to heal her wounded heart and show her life was still worth the

living. That the world was still as full of love and light as when the older poets sang its praise.

The woman on the pier had turned with bowed head toward the river that, at that moment, seemed sprinkled with golden stars. Nita rose and glided noiselessly toward her but suddenly, as the moonlight faded, the figure disappeared.

Had she taken the final plunge? Yet Nita felt sure the splash would have reached her ears, as she stood on the edge of the pier searching the waters below with straining eyes.

She was not aware that a carriage had stopped in the street, not far from where she stood, until a harsh voice roused her.

“A moment if you please.”

She turned and confronted a portly gentleman in a dress suit whose sharp eyes glittered in the moonlight as they surveyed her searchingly. His fat hands toyed with a huge gold watch chain and his large, brutal mouth, half hidden by a stubby mustache, snapped out the words like a threat.

“What is it?” said Nita calmly. Already she felt a decided aversion for this pompous-looking vulgarian.

“I am searching,” he puffed, “for a woman whom I believe has hidden herself somewhere hereabout. She wears a black silk dress without sleeves and, I believe, carries a lace mantilla. Have you seen any such person?” eying Nita severely.

“Might I ask your reason for knowing?” she asked, hoping to gain time to think.

“No, you might not. And you will do well, young man, if you know what you are about, to give me any information that will lead to this person’s discovery. Have you seen her—yes or no, for my time is valuable?”

“Yes,” replied Nita who had made up her mind that right or wrong she would give this disagreeable person a long chase.

“Ah!” said the portly gentleman rubbing his hands.

“The person you describe was here only a few moments ago. I was smoking on the

pier and I am sure she did not see me. After a few moments, she got into a carriage at the corner and was driven rapidly away in the direction of down-town." Was it imagination or did Nita really hear a sigh of relief from the shadows.

"Ah, that's good," cried the other; "May I?" putting his hand in his pocket as if to draw out some money; but seeing the expression on Nita's face he withdrew his hand.

"Well, thank you, anyway," he growled, and started off at a rapid gait for his carriage.

"Keep to the river front," he yelled to the driver, "and hustle down-town." The door slammed and the coupé rolled rapidly away into the darkness.

"You may come out," said Nita, after the sound of the wheels had died away.

The woman who had been concealed behind some bales of cotton near-by, glided out into the moonlight. She was a handsome creature with wonderful black eyes that now shone with a restless fire.

"Oh, how can I thank you," she murmured, covering Nita's hand with kisses. "You have saved me from a terrible predicament."

"I am not sure that I have done right," said Nita, trying to calm her. "Tell me your trouble in your own way."

"I will, and then you shall judge for yourself," said the stranger in a choking voice. "That man who was here, whom you spoke to a moment ago, is my husband. To-night there was a ball given at our home, on Madison Avenue; it was necessary that I should be there, and yet while I was forced to dance and appear merry, the fate of one I loved—my brother—was in danger, and I alone could save him—warn him that he must fly."

She paused, overcome with emotion, and her sobs were long and painful. Nita did her best to comfort the poor woman who finally dried her eyes and continued.

"My brother had done wrong, he was implicated in the transactions of some swindling stock-company. I overheard the chief of police, who happened to be one of the guests,

tell a friend that a warrant for George's arrest had been placed in the hands of a detective. My husband caught the remark as well as I, and, as he hated my poor brother, he must have made up his mind that I should not have an opportunity to warn him. For an hour afterwards, he followed me about keeping his eyes on my face.

"I was in despair, for every moment was precious. How could I contrive to escape? At last, my husband was called away for a moment into the hall by one of the servants. I pretended to become faint, too ill to dance any longer, and begged to be excused. I did not wait to regain my room, but snatching up a shawl in the dressing room I rushed out into the night. A few minutes later, he must have discovered my absence and followed me in a cab; for one moment, we were only a block apart, but owing to the darkness I eluded him and rushed down to the pier where I thought I might hide until I saw which way his carriage was going. But for you, I should have been lost. Had he found

me, it would have been an excuse to put me away in some private asylum, for he is tired of me as I am of him," bursting into tears.

Nita's warm little heart bled for this unfortunate woman.

What a happy freak of fortune had led her down to this pier on this particular night! She would be the means of saving an erring brother from prison and a poor wife from her husband's tyranny. What a grand night's work!

"Come," she said, gently putting her arm around her trembling companion. "At any moment your husband may discover his mistake and be on our track. Come with me and we shall see if two women cannot outwit a single man." The stranger looked at Nita in astonishment when "two women" was mentioned, but said nothing.

They were fortunate enough to find a carriage only a block away into which Nita helped the stranger, who was almost fainting with the fatigue and excitement of the last half hour.

They had scarcely taken their seats, when the sound of wheels was heard, and looking out Nita saw that they had been observed and that the pursuit had already begun in earnest. She whispered some quick directions to the driver and the carriage tore along the quay.

"What is the matter" asked her companion who had relapsed into a semi-unconscious state in the corner.

"Nothing" said Nita carelessly.

But the stranger was not satisfied, and thrust her head out of the window.

"He has discovered his mistake, "she cried in a fever of excitement," and is following us. I caught sight of his face as the carriage rolled under an electric light." She took a handful of money out of her pocket and thrust it into the driver's hands.

"It is a matter of life and death," she cried, "drive as fast as you can."

He whipped up his horse and for some moments only the sound of rolling wheels rattling over the uneven pavement disturbed the stillness of the night.

Nita and her companion sat listening with bated breath to hear if the carriage in pursuit was drawing nearer. At last, she could bear the suspense no longer and peeped out of the window. The cab that was following them was slowly gaining ground, it was now only a block away.

"Oh, what is to be done," moaned the stranger when she heard this intelligence. "I would rather fling myself into the river than fall into his hands again. You saved me once. Save me again," imploringly.

"At least I will try," said Nita, overcome with pity for the helpless woman beside her. "Let me think."

She sat for a moment in deep thought while those dreadful wheels seemed to be rolling nearer. Then she rose and whispered some directions to the driver who turned the next corner sharply and drove away in a Westerly direction across the city.

"Have you thought of a plan to escape," asked her companion anxiously.

"Yes; but I am not sure it will succeed. In a few blocks, the driver will turn the corner; there we must alight and find shelter in a doorway while the carriage goes on. I am in hopes that your husband will not discover his mistake but will continue the pursuit which will give us an opportunity for escape and find your brother."

"How good you are," murmured the unknown gratefully. "Ah if I had only had the fortune to have known a man like you, I should not be the miserable creature that I am," with a faint sob.

Nita consoled her as best she could, and felt amply repaid for all the trouble she had gone through by this poor woman's gratitude. Her own gloomy thoughts vanished before this greater grief; at least her new life with all its trials had not proved utterly worthless.

The corner was turned and Nita, supporting her companion, found refuge in a dark alley leading into a dirty court while the cab rolled rapidly away. The ruse worked like a charm. They had the satisfaction of watch-

ing their empty carriage still pursued by the husband whose angry face could be seen in the window as he urged on his driver with oaths and threats.

Their hiding place however could be only temporary.

The husband's carriage would soon overtake the one they had deserted; he would discover the mistake and, understanding the trick that had been played on him, return to the chase with fresh energy and a new feeling of rage.

Nita looked searchingly at the houses on the other side of the street in hopes that a new hiding place might occur to her, but the black windows offered no solution to the problem she was revolving in her mind.

She recognized by many familiar signs in the dim light that she was in her own neighborhood, that she was only a block from her own house.

She might have offered the stranger a temporary refuge there, but unfortunately she had mislaid her night key, and to rouse

up the house at that hour with a strange woman was not to be thought of. Some prying neighbor would be on the watch and draw his, or her, own evil conclusions; besides, Arthur might refuse to let them in. But time was passing, the husband might even now have discovered his mistake, something must be done and at once.

Near the corner by which they stood, a brilliantly lit building with many colored lights over its portals attracted her eye. There was a large illuminated sign hung above the entrance where she read in blue letters:

GRAND BALL MASQUE.

At once her plan was made and she communicated it in a low voice to her companion. They could go to the ball, hire some disguise, and when the dancers dispersed, escape with the crowd. It would be impossible for the husband to discover their identity even if it occurred to him to search the hall.

Taking her companion's trembling arm in hers they set out. Nita was well provided

with money, and, after paying the entrance fee, she hired a blue domino for the unknown and a white folly costume for herself; having assumed their masks, they boldly entered the hall, confident that escape was now assured.

A quadrille was just being formed and though neither felt much in the mood for dancing they thought it best to join one of the sets in order to divert suspicion, for there were scarcely fifty people present.

The music struck up and they were soon in the whirl of the dance, which diverted them from their own disagreeable thoughts.

Nita found herself, during the pauses, surveying with a languorous interest the various couples that made up her own set. There was one lady directly vis-a-vis, a slender creature robed in the white garments of a Roman vestal who particularly attracted her attention. Somewhere, she felt instinctively, she had seen that slight figure and those glistening curls before.

A white mask trimmed with lace closely hid every feature of the unknown face, but

a pair of flashing eyes could be seen twinkling through the crevices. Of course it was very absurd in Nita to fancy that she knew her neighbor, but she still continued to study the lady in white through all the changes of the dance.

Once they were very close to each other and in changing partners she clasped the stranger's hand in hers.

She regarded the slender fingers and delicate wrist a moment as they swung around into their places. Then started with a stifled cry. She had recognized her own engagement ring on the stranger's hand. There was no doubt about it. Her vis-a-vis was Arthur! What if he should recognize her and in the company of a strange woman? That would give him a fresh opportunity to make fun of her, to scoff at her chivalrous attempts to protect her oppressed sex.

But fortunately the lady in white seemed to be too particularly engrossed in her companion to pay much attention to the other couples. This gentleman who wore a dress

suit and a simple black mask Nita was quite certain was Jack Follansby, in fact the lady in white addressed him more than once as "Jack."

The dance was drawing to a close and Nita was congratulating herself that her incognito had been successfully preserved, when a new danger presented itself.

As the music died away and the dancers were returning to their places, the floor-manager stepped upon the stage where the musicians were gathered, and clapped his hands for silence. Every attention was drawn towards him as he opened his lips to speak.

"Ladies and gentleman," he began, "I have been requested by a detective from Police Headquarters to ask you to unmask. A great diamond theft was committed only a few hours ago during the progress of a ball on Fifth Avenue. The criminals suspected are a man and a woman, both young. They were pursued within a few doors of this hall and it is thought that they may have sought

a hiding place here. The treasurer and costumer are almost certain that two such persons secured tickets and dominoes, only a few moments ago. Therefore in the cause of justice, I must ask you that wear dominoes to lay them aside for a moment, and everyone, the masks. It will only be for a little while and you will greatly facilitate the discovery of the real criminals."

He bowed and retired. The guests of the evening looked at each other interrogatively as if to say "Are you the thief?" but without delay they began to remove their masks and such part of their costumes as could be laid aside.

Nita stood as if nailed to the spot. The danger of the situation did not strike her so forcibly at that moment as the thought that she had been deceived, that the unfortunate wife whom she had sought to save from the clutches of a cruel husband, had turned out to be only a vulgar thief. She was ready to cry from sheer vexation. She looked around in vain for her companion—the unknown had disappeared!

Her eyes met instead those of the detective who was standing only a few paces away surveying the scene with his sharp eyes, and the glance he cast at Nita seemed full of suspicion and malevolence.

It was no time for hesitation for the others had already taken off their masks. The detective was still regarding her curiously; if she hoped to escape it must be done at once.

Every second she expected to feel a hand upon her shoulder and be compelled to identify herself. But what explanation could suffice under such circumstances. She had shown herself to be this woman's accomplice in aiding her to escape. Not even the fact that she was a journalist could have saved her from gaol. In fancy she saw herself arraigned before the judge and sentenced to a long term of imprisonment, while reporters from her own paper were standing near at hand to take down notes of the case.

She remained there, stupefied by this confusion of thoughts not knowing which way

to turn to escape. The door was guarded and the detective with the implacable eyes was striding toward her with deliberate steps one hand in his pocket as if he were getting a revolver ready in case of any resistance.

Yet still she did not move.

Just as a large and hairy hand was reached out to grasp her arm one of the dancers in a folly's dress capered between them and struck at Nita playfully with the bladder he carried in his hand.

It seemed to rouse her from her stupor to the danger of her situation. She scanned the hall rapidly and then noticed to the right a small garden filled with imitation tropical plants and tin palm trees, lit with colored electric lights. She ran with the hopelessness of despair into this garden not knowing whether there was any exit or not through which she might hope to escape.

The place seemed deserted, but as she threaded her way rapidly among the plants she came upon a woman in white seated under a palm tree eating an ice. She looked

up a moment and Nita caught a glimpse of the face. It was Arthur again!

The sight only added to her fever of mind. What if they should bear her away to gaol before his very eyes! What a disgrace for them both!

In the midst of these terrifying thoughts, as she ran around the garden like a squirrel in a cage, she suddenly perceived a narrow flight of stairs that must have been used in summer by the workmen when the sliding roof was thrown open.

Nita darted up the steps without a moment's thought, only eager to get away from the vicinity of the lady in white who was still calmly consuming her ice under the tree.

Nita had almost reached the scuttle and was lifting it, when she heard the sound of many voices in the garden below.

"Did a man pass by you within the last few minutes?" roared the detective, evidently addressing the only occupant of the place.

“Yes,” was the reply. “A very suspicious looking character ran up those stairs only a moment ago.”

Arthur had unconsciously betrayed her!

She crawled through the scuttle just as the sound of heavy feet clattered on the stairs below. A faint light in the east showed her that it was nearly daybreak as she paused for a moment to take breath.

Beyond her, in an uneven line, stretched the roofs and chimneys of a long block of houses. Surely in these acres of chimney-pots and towering gables she could find some place of temporary refuge.

A battering sound beneath her showed that the pursuers would soon force open the scuttle. She turned and made her way as rapidly as she could over the broken tiles and rusty tin, stumbling and falling over bricks and bits of mortar and keeping well out of sight behind the tall chimneys.

It seemed years since she had begun travelling along in this aimless fashion, when a cry from behind warned her that her pursuers

had forced open the scuttle and were scouring the roof in search of her. Once as she turned the corner of a chimney she caught sight of the detective roaring out orders to the men who accompanied him. They divided their forces so as to hem her in—no escape seemed possible !

She was almost tempted to try and climb down one of the chimneys, but as a faint smoke could be seen hovering over many, the possibility of dropping into a fire or landing on top of somebody's breakfast caused her to resign the thought.

Matters were getting more and more desperate. In five minutes at the most she would be in the hands of the enemy.

At last she found herself on the top of a flat roof, protected from her hunters by tall chimneys and gables on either hand. To her joy, she saw that the scuttle was partly raised for ventilation. In a moment she had swung it open, crawled in and bolted it behind her. And none too soon, for as the bolt clicked a voice she recognized was heard.

"I am sure I saw him on the roof a moment ago. Take a good search around the chimneys and any hole that looks like a hiding place."

A hand rattled the door above her head but finding it would not open the owner went away, as she could tell by his footsteps.

Nita sat very still on the uncomfortable ladder, resting herself after that terrible flight over the roof. She was exhausted and ready to faint with fatigue.

If the redoubtable detective had appeared at that moment, she would have been tempted to give in without a struggle.

In a very confused state of mind and half asleep, she made her way slowly down the ladder into the hall. She seemed to be still haunted with the consciousness that she was being pursued and every shadow caused her to start in affright. The very air seemed peopled with enemies who stretched out their long arms to seize her as she crept silently along.

She had reached the second floor still pursued by these imaginary foes, when she perceived a door standing ajar. Without pausing to examine if the room was occupied, she glided into it, locking the door securely behind her. It was scarcely light enough to see distinctly, but the bed was empty and hastily tearing off that hateful fool's dress she flung herself upon it, and a moment later was sound asleep.

No dream filled her slumbers; she lay there as if insensible, dead. How long, she never knew, but she was roused by a wild thumping on the door.

She started in affright. Had they discovered even this retreat? Was she never to find peace? She sank back on the bed with a groan of despair. Well, let them break the door in and seize her, she had no heart to try and escape any longer.

The thumping on the door continued; finally a voice roared out:

“Say, are you going to get up?”

That voice! That voice! It was Arthur's!

"Is that you, my dear," she asked.

"Yes. It's nine o'clock."

She rolled on the bed and laughed from sheer delight. She was in her own house, in her own room, she could have screamed with joy. The pursuit, the strange woman, it had all been a dream, a terrible dream. Then her eyes fell on the tattered fool's dress that lay on the floor and she knew that it had all been true, that every moment of agony in that experience had been real. But she was safe now; no one could find her within the four walls of her own home. She rose, and picking up the hateful garb she had worn at the ball, she locked it safely away in the closet and began to dress for breakfast.

Half an hour later, a distinguished-looking young man lounged sleepily into the pretty dining room and sat down at the dainty breakfast table where his wife, in a pearl-colored peignoir was poring over the morning paper.

"Great excitement," said the lady, raising her face for a morning kiss; "Mrs. Brighton

Cashmore gave a ball last night and all her diamonds were stolen. The culprits were chased all across the city but managed to escape by disguising themselves and joining a Ball Masque at the 'Parisian Gardens' on the next block. But they finally got the woman. Here, do you want to read about it?" tossing over the paper.

The young man hid his blushing face behind the sugar bowl and hastily glanced over the article.

"Do you think they stand any chance of catching the man?" asked the wife biting a piece of toast.

"No, not the slightest," said the husband.

VIII

TWO TETE-A-TETES

All this time the Socialists had not forgotten Nita's editorial ; and after an illustrated description of the attack appeared, in which they were ridiculed and laughed at while Vaness was lionized, they were with difficulty persuaded from burning his house down.

They contented themselves, however, the following day, by besieging the press-room of "The Owl," and that afternoon it appeared very late, printed on wrapping-paper, as the basement had been barricaded by the mob.

Instead of discomfiting the editor by these measures, and forcing him into subjection,

they were the means of further advertising the paper, and copies that had been printed on the wrappers were eagerly bought at a premium as curiosities by the crowd.

The offended parties then changed their tactics and began to harass the poor editor in his home. Misfortunes were of daily occurrence in that once peaceful household, and it was evident that the cook, who sympathized with the Socialists, had become their ally. It was decidedly embarrassing at a dinner-party to have a large turkey explode with a startling report, just as the guests were comfortably seated; and what adequate apology could be made to a visitor when a dynamite cartridge went off under the sofa, and he found himself reluctantly soaring towards the ceiling in a shower of splinters and bits of blue plush?

The Vaness family were soon afraid to sit down to a meal for fear of its being poisoned, and they had already lost two poodle-dogs and a tortoise-shell cat whom they had

induced to sample various suspicious-looking viands in which certain death seemed to lurk.

But though Nita was the ostensible editor of "The Owl," Vaness had too good a nose for news not to turn these daily persecutions to account; and the readers of the paper were daily informed of every fresh outrage, written up in his most sensational style. The anti-socialists at once rallied to his assistance, and in spite of Nita's mismanagement, the paper slowly began to increase in circulation.

Her sublime disregard for news had discouraged the old editors, who finally sent in their resignations and retired from the field in disgust. Their places were promptly filled with women, and the office was once more established on an amicable footing.

This change, which she had long looked forward to, created many extra expenses. For while the young ladies on the staff were content with small wages, she was reluctantly compelled to employ a small army of men to act as their escorts when there was work to be done after dark.

While the general character of the paper had changed, it was astonishing what a number of scandals were unearthed by these petticoat-reporters. Each had her grievance against some other woman, and took the first opportunity to be revenged in print. In fact, one day, when Nita was away, the paper came out entirely filled up with personal attacks; and the following day the office was invaded by an army of victims, who fought a pitched battle with the young ladies on the paper, and were not satisfied until they had completely routed them and borne off pounds of switches and at least a bucketful of hair-pins as trophies of their triumph.

But Nita felt that her labors had not been entirely in vain. Now, when she came down to the office of a morning, her senses were no longer offended by smoking men in their coat-sleeves, keeping up a running fire at cuspidors, and punctuating their remarks with sulphurous exclamations. Instead, she confronted a line of rosy-cheeked girls with bewitching aprons of many pockets, chewing

gum or sipping tea as they went about their various duties, singing softly to themselves.

The files of old papers that had lined the walls were discarded because they were dirty to handle, and had been replaced by engravings in neat frames, mottoes in worsted, and plaques painted by the young ladies themselves. About twenty office-cats snoozed on the piles of rejected manuscripts, and as many cages of canary-birds depended from the ceiling.

Even the great presses were ornamented with pink ribbons, and the printer's devil (the most charming little devil you ever saw) was actually clean, each member of the staff scrubbing her at least once a day.

Though the office and press-room appeared in this gala attire, Nita's troubles had not ended by any means,

She was perpetually being called upon to settle quarrels among her fair allies; for discussions and resignations were of daily frequency. For instance, the dramatic editor—a sweet young thing of nineteen—

having been jilted in love by the leading-man of the Fourth Avenue Theatre, took every opportunity to make fun of his acting in the columns of the paper. Other members of the staff, who had been won over by his classic features and Hyperion curls, at once arrayed themselves against the critic, and finally, after a severe attack on their idol, the young lady was unceremoniously hustled out of the office, minus a bang and many hair-pins.

Mrs. Brighton Cashmore, the millionaire's wife, who paid the paper a thousand dollars a year on condition that her costumes should be conspicuously described on every social occasion, at once cancelled her contract when she found herself written up after the Patriarchs' Ball as "a bilious-looking woman with a face like a hawk, who made an absurd display of her scrawny neck and hired jewelry."

Nita herself was to blame for the latter expensive mistake, because she had instructed her young ladies that in gathering

news they were always to tell the truth; and they acted accordingly, even when a member of the Four Hundred was involved.

When Clarence Delaney ran for mayor against Patsey Flaherty of the Fourth Ward he won the race, not by "a neck," as the sporting men would say, but by a mustache. This delightful facial adornment carried the office by storm. He caught every trusting female heart in the place on its points. From that time they were with him to a man—that is, a woman. Of course if he kissed the political editor behind the ice-cooler, that was nobody's business: it was part of the campaign-fund. Anyway, the young ladies of the staff were so won over by the charms of that mustache that they worried their brothers and husbands and lovers to vote and work for him at the polls, and Delaney went through with flying colors.

It was only necessary to glance over "The Owl," in its present condition to see what a great change had been wrought by the new administration. The news-columns were no

longer coruscated with crimes, and prize-fights were never fought over again in its pages. Every paragraph was pervaded with peace. Articles on "How to Keep a Husband at Home," contributed by a divorcee on the staff, ran with great success through several weeks. "What to Do With Our Girls" also found many appreciative readers, though it evoked some malicious replies from rival newspapers.

Yet, in spite of all Nita's well-meant efforts, the public seemed to be very unenthusiastic over the change in tone the paper had taken, and seemed to feel very little interest in this organ of homelife. The paper pleased women; but their husbands wouldn't buy it; and Nita had long ago antagonized the political leaders in the city because they chewed tobacco and swore in the office before her pure-minded young ladies.

As the subscription-list began to fall off at an alarming rate, Nita finally decided that a little mild news would not hurt the paper much, and might possibly do it some

good. But here a new difficulty arose. The sweet young things could not be persuaded by tears or threats to interview criminals, or enter bar-rooms or other resorts where news was supposed to lurk; and so Nita had to let them return to their essays and Greek lexicons, while she tried to think out some other plan of raising the circulation.

The rival journals caused Nita many tears, for hers was a sensitive soul, and their gibes wounded her sorely. They were never tired of poking fun at the paper. She was nicknamed "The Petticoat Editor," and her staff "the editorial harem." One paper even insinuated that the police would do well to look into the affairs of such an office, as they had seen the chief with the dramatic editor in his arms, plainly in view of the street.

Poor Nita had forgotten for a moment her physical change, and, at the time, was comforting the poor little woman with all the resources at her command.

So it was that her reputation suffered. Once, while trying to soothe a young wife

who had come to her for advice in a divorce suit, the irate husband surprised them together in the private office and severely pummelled the editor, who was unable to explain the harmless character of his caresses.

Altogether, Nita's lot was not a happy one, for the stockholders of the paper had begun to murmur against her management of their interests, and even insinuated that a padded cell was the best place for her to seclude herself in.

As for Vaness, he roamed about the house like an uneasy spirit, longing to be again in the hustling atmosphere of the city, dying of inanition in his dainty prison. To add to his misery, he had been forced to entertain a maiden aunt from the country during the past fortnight: a wealthy though terrible person with a false front, who frowned on his frivolity, and dragged him off at all hours of the day on shopping expeditions, and once, finding him smoking a cigarette, promptly cut the whole family out of her will.

That smoke cost at least fifty thousand dollars; and the awful aunt took great pains to let the other relatives know what a fast young woman Arthur's wife had become—a suspicion she had always entertained from the very first, she said.

Now that the enemies Nita had created by her ill advised eloquence had ceased hostilities, Vaness decided to give a small party, to make up for his aunt's disastrous visit.

At least two hundred invitations were sent out, and Vaness had hoped that at least half of that number would respond; but, by ten o'clock, only twenty men and about half a dozen women had made their appearance. Not even the elegant brocaded costume that the hostess wore for the first time on this occasion was a consolation for the failure of the entertainment. The sight of the melancholy gathering was a severe disappointment, for the Vanesses had been very popular with a certain set and their invitations eagerly sought for.

Vaness was not destined to remain long in ignorance as to the cause of this dereliction on the part of their friends. Passing the smoking-room on the way to complete arrangements for supper, two men were overheard talking. It was wrong, of course, to listen, but they spoke so loudly that Vaness could not help hearing.

"What a relief to get out of that parlor!" said one, with a yawn. "I never was so bored in all my life. I am so glad I didn't bring my wife along."

"So am I. In fact I shouldn't have allowed her, for they do tell some terrible stories about Vaness and his wife of late."

"Yes; I suppose that is the reason why so few women are present. They all sent excuses, except a few who were indifferent about their characters."

"But Mrs. Vaness used to be such a charming, affable little woman, I can hardly believe —"

"Yes, I know all that; but I have seen her smoking on the balcony with my own

eyes where anybody could see her; and our cook, who left here only last week, says she swears like a trooper."

"I know Vaness has greatly changed," said the other, thoughtfully. "I suppose having such a vicious wife has driven him out of his senses. He seems to have lost all his manliness of character, and they do talk scandalously about the manner in which that office is run, filled as it is with young women. It can't be entirely proper."

"Well, no; that stands to reason," with a laugh.

They continued their uncomplimentary remarks, but Vaness had heard quite enough, and he glided noiselessly away to the dining-room with a flushed face and a beating heart.

Was it possible that the fair name of the family was in danger? that they had become objects of suspicion in the eyes of their neighbors? regarded as disreputable characters, not worthy of association with their wives? Vaness groaned in spirit; he had no idea matters had reached such a terrible

climax. Bitterly did he curse the day when Uncle Oliver and his petrified cats had ever found lodgment within those peaceful walls. That dreadful bargain had brought them endless misery, and the future was dark before them. He felt as if he would take great pleasure in wringing Uncle Oliver's neck if he had not been the guardian of their precious secret.

Vaness saw that the supper-table was properly arranged, and with a heavy heart returned to the melancholy guests in the parlor, who already began to show signs of uneasiness, and looked terribly bored.

"Ah, there you are!" cried Jack Follansby, as the hostess appeared, with a melancholy expression on her face. "I have been looking all around the place for you. Come, I want to have a good long talk with you; it is so many months since I have had an opportunity," leading the lady in rose towards an embrasure in the window, where they were half-hidden from the guests in the parlor.

“Do you know,” he said, with a nervous laugh, “I have fancied that you have been trying to avoid me for the past six weeks? Anyway, you have changed decidedly in your manner, and we used to be such very good friends.”

“Yes, I feel the change myself,” said Vanessa, with a long-drawn sigh.

“It has worried me exceedingly,” Follansby replied, edging nearer. “You remember what delightful *tete-a-tetes* we used to have together in this very window while Arthur was down-town—when you wore that bewitching tea-gown of blue silk with its cascade of lace, and you sang to me and brought me tea in the most delightful Sévres cup?”

“Did I?” asked his companion with a wild stare.

“Ah, you have forgotten so soon!” said Follansby, sadly, taking the fair white hand in his and stroking it caressingly. “Why, I have cherished still a souvenir of one occasion when you allowed me to keep one of your

gloves. Here it is now," taking one from his pocket. "See, I have carried it ever since next to my heart."

"Let me have it," exclaimed the lady in pink, almost snatching it out of his hand.

"Why, what a dreadful passion you are in!" he cried, teasingly, yet somewhat startled at the angry expression in his companion's eyes. "I can hardly believe you are the same little woman who sang to me that night, when we sat here in the moonlight, one of those delightful Spanish love-songs that seemed to be so suited to the occasion. Have you forgotten that too?"

"I—I remember very well," said the lady in pink, in a hollow voice.

"Yes; and one of your arms was bare and I stooped and kissed it, and you were not angry a bit—were you?"

If the light had not been so dim he might have seen that his companion was eying him with a stony glare.

"Ah, you have been very cruel of late," sighed Jack; "and Arthur is away so much,

surely we could arrange to meet here frequently. I could console you for his absence," drawing nearer and taking the other hand in his. "Tell me, Nita," he murmured, "when can I see you again, in this place, alone?"

"Don't, don't," murmured his companion. "Let me go; I must return to my guests. Our absence will be noted."

He freed her reluctantly.

"But the day? Fix a time," he murmured.

"I will write to you," in a choking voice; and she was gone.

"So," said Vaness, when the hall was reached, "Nita found a consoler during my absence, and one whom I least expected—Jack Follansby. Anyway, my eyes have been opened to his perfidy; I shall know whom to trust if I ever become my old self again. As for you, madam," shaking a jewelled fist in the direction of the drawing-room, "won't I have it out with you with a wet towel when we go to bed!" and the lady in pink was forced to resort to the punch-bowl in the corner to suppress her emotions.

Nita, all oblivious to the scene that had just been enacted in the bow-window, was entertaining Miss Olcott in a corner of the library. The latter wore a peculiar costume of white satin and gold, her yellow hair, rising above the white points of the broad collar surrounding her slender throat, lent her the appearance of a huge sunflower.

She seemed to be more interested in her companion than in the ice at her elbow. In fact she was regarding Nita with such a languishing expression that it was rather uncomfortable.

Nita even stammered out uneasily,—

“Why—why do you look at me that way, Miss Olcott?”

“Does not the sunflower alwaye turn her face to the sun?” she asked, flashing a most killing glance at her interlocutor.

“Y—es, I believe she does, though I don’t understand much of botany.” Then to herself, “Why, I believe this young person has indirectly proposed that I shall kiss her. I

will see if Arthur has had anything to do with bringing about this situation."

Miss Olcott sighed when she found he was not going to avail himself of the opportunity, and began nervously drumming on the arm of her chair with her white fingers.

"How changed you are during the past month!" she said, finally. "I can hardly believe you are the same person."

"Indeed! and why not?" asked Nita a little brusquely.

"Well, I used to see you very frequently, but now you seem rather to avoid me; and we used to have such lovely times together!"

"Did we?" abruptly.

"Why, don't you remember?"

"Oh, yes. I beg you pardon; I am getting so absent-minded."

"Ah, it is so easy for a man to forget," said Miss Olcott, with a sigh. "Better for us poor women if our memories were as short."

"Now, I wonder what particular occasion she is alluding to?" Nita asked herself.

"Evidently Arthur is mixed up in this. I

must try and draw her out." Then turning to her companion she said: "Ah, you mean those evenings—"

"Yes; when we used to dine at Torretti's, in that funny little room that overlooked the square. I remember at the time you were very absent-minded, as you are now. I suppose everything had not gone just right at home. I could read as much in your face. Ah! these frivolous young wives are a sore trial to men of your brains and intellect!"

"You are entirely mistaken," said Nita, rather savagely. "Mrs. Vaness is a woman of great intelligence, and with a knowledge of life much beyond her years."

"Bravely spoken!" said Miss Olcott, with a laugh. "It is only right for a husband to stick up for his wife; but we know," tapping her companion playfully with her fan. "We know, don't we?"

"How I should like to scratch her face!" said Nita to herself. "I wonder what she is insinuating by 'We know'?"

"By the way," said Miss Olcott, after another pause, "I am not so sure that you do not owe me a very abject apology."

"What for?"

"Do you remember the eighth of May, six weeks ago?"

Did Nita remember it? What a question to ask! She wished in her heart that she might forget it, for it was on the evening of that day that she had made that terrible bargain in souls.

"Oh, I remember it perfectly well," thoughtfully. "What of it?"

"Only this, O man of uncertain memory: you met me that afternoon on Fifth avenue, and arranged to drive me out to High Bridge to dinner the next day. Now, what have you to say for yourself? Ought I to forgive you after such a disappointment? And ever since you have studiously avoided me. I have had no chance to get an explanation."

"I suppose I was ashamed of myself," stammered Nita, almost ready to burst into sobs. "I—I had such important business

complications on hand at the time that they drove everything else out of my head."

"And I waited for you almost in tears, heartless creature, for two mortal hours, expecting you to come. I had pictured to myself another *al fresco* dinner, such as we had enjoyed there once before, when we had the table spread under the trees in a lovely arcadian grove by the river. And you insisted on feeding me like a baby, and we laughed and chattered like a couple of children let loose for a holiday, and were just as foolish and happy. And you crowned me with roses just as they do in romantic poems, and we both sipped champagne out of the same glass; and when we parted, you gave me this seal from your watch-chain—see, I have kept it ever since," taking the little jewel out of her bosom.

"I think I had better keep this," said Nita, taking it and putting it away in her pocket.

"Ah!" sighed Miss Olcott, "those beautiful days will never come again."

“Not if I can help it,” said poor Nita, to herself, grinding her teeth savagely. “Just leave it to me that they will never come again.” Controlling herself with an effort, she said aloud, “Oh, I dare say we shall see a great deal of each other this summer. There may be many such pleasant days in store for us both.”

“You don’t know how much that hope cheers me,” said Miss Olcott, gushingly. “I have now something to look forward to and dream about when I am alone.”

“And so have I,” said Nita to herself, with a frown.

“We can meet very often,” continued Miss Olcott, “and no one need be any the wiser. Your wife never sees anything; she is too much blinded with love, poor little thing!”

“Not so blind as you think, you hussy!” said Nita, under her teeth. Then, fearing that her feelings would betray her, she said hastily, “I think we had better go back to the parlor now or we shall be missed. It is just as well to be discreet in these matters.”

"Oh, I know!" with a significant smile, tapping her companion playfully with her fan. "We understand, don't we?"

Nita thrust her hands firmly in her pockets, lest the temptation of having that smiling face so near hers might prove stronger than her self-control.

"Oh, yes, we understand," she said, grimly, as she lifted the portière for Miss Olcott to pass into the room beyond. "And there is some one else whom I shall come to an understanding with before this night is over"—grimly to herself.

It was with a sense of relief that she got rid of Miss Olcott. Then, no longer able to control her tears, and sick at heart, she crept up to her room and flinging herself on the bed burst into a flood of tears.

"Ah! it has come at last," she murmured brokenly, after the first paroxysm had passed away. "I knew Arthur was concealing something from me all along, and now the terrible truth is made clear. Oh, how miserable I am!" hiding her burning face

among the pillows. "How unhappy I am!" and tears again choked her utterance. "To think that Alice Olcott, my dearest friend, should have plotted to make me unhappy! Hateful thing! she shall never set her foot across the threshold of this house again while I am in it. And as for Arthur—I will tell him what I have heard. He will attempt to defend himself, but I will not listen. I will leave him—I will go back to dear mamma and try to find in her a solace for my poor wounded heart. And when it is possible, I will get a separation, and Arthur shall never see me again—never!" And then she began to cry afresh, and moaned and sobbed as if her very heart were breaking.

How long she lay in this condition she did not know; but she had forgotten all about the party below, and was only occupied in thinking of her own misery.

At last a thought roused her. She was eager to see him, to confront him with the details of his guilt, and to tell him that all was over between them forever.

She bathed her eyes hastily in some cold water, for they were swollen with crying, and then hurried downstairs. The guests had departed early, glad to get away from such a gloomy entertainment.

Arthur was walking nervously up and down the parlors, and started angrily as she entered.

"I am glad to see you have been crying," he said, looking at her eyes. "But tears, madam, will not wash away the scandal you have brought upon your name."

"And angry words, sir, cannot stifle the voice of your coward conscience, that must torture you at this moment for the wrongs against your wife in the past."

"What do you mean?" he demanded.

"What do *you* mean?" she cried.

"I can read guilt in her face," he said to himself, eying Nita suspiciously.

"He is trembling already with shame"—to herself as she boldly confronted him.

"You have deceived me!" they cried, almost in the same breath.

"Is he mocking me?" she asked herself.

"Is it attempted bravery that she echoes my words?" he repeated to himself, with a frown. "Let the sight of this bring a blush to your cheek," taking a long mousquetaire glove out and waiving it triumphantly in close proximity to Nita's nose. "What have you to say to this?"

"And what have you to say to *this*?" cried the lady in pink, who was decidedly put out at the sight of her glove in his hands.

"Where did you get my seal?" he stammered.

"Where did you get my glove?"

"I found it in possession of your dear friend Jack Follonsby—mine no more. It seems that you did not dislike him quite so much as you pretended in the old days when your soul had not changed places with mine. He told me much of the past which you would not care to have me repeat—of tete-a-tetes by moonlight, etc. Ah, it was well for you to complain of your household cares while you were singing and flirting with Follansby!"

“And you did well to murmur about your hard work on the paper when you were driving Miss Olcott all over the country, and dining with her *al fresco* in arcadian groves! At least I have gained something by this odious bargain in souls—I have found you out.”

“My discoveries have been quite as numerous as yours, and more unpleasant,” he cried. “My conscience is entirely clear of any wrong. A dinner under the trees with my wife’s intimate friend—what does that matter?”

“And I only entertained one of your stupid associates because you were not here to take him off my hands.”

“Evidently you did not find the duty as unpleasant as you would have me think.”

“And I am not so silly as to believe that it was through a desire to please me that you dined and wined with Miss Olcott.”

And they both began walking angrily up and down the room like two caged animals, stopping in the middle of the floor to snap out retorts.

“Heartless woman!”

“Cruel deceiver!”

“To betray a trusting heart!”

“To take advantage of a young wife’s innocence!”

Then she paused in the middle of the floor and said:

“If you had shown any sign of repentance, I might forgive you; but no, you are hardened; you do not care if I break my heart.”

“If you showed some regret for your flirtation, I should be merciful; but you have the boldness to brave me out. Very well, I have no more to say.”

“But I have. The law shall set me free.”

“The sooner the better.”

“I will return to my mother.”

“You have my full consent.”

They paused in the wrangle as a figure suddenly appeared in the doorway. It was Uncle Oliver’s Indian servant Gusko; he was very much agitated.

“Sahib,” he stammered, addressing Nita, “my Lord is dying.”

Then with a bound he disappeared up the stairs again.

The husband and wife stood for a moment regarding each other in stony silence. Suddenly Arthur started and seized Nita by the arm; all hostility was forgotten.

“Did you hear?” he blurted out; “Uncle—Oliver—is dying!”

“Dying!” she murmured, vacantly.

“Yes,” seizing her arm, “he is dying, and the secret of our souls will die with him.”

Then they broke away from each other and rushed madly up the stairs, forgetting their quarrel—everything but the new danger that threatened their future!

IX

THEY AGREE TO AGREE

It was quite evident to the husband and wife, when they burst into the bed-room, that Uncle Oliver's last hour had come. Two candles at the foot of the bed cast a pale blue light over his withered features as he lay there.

Over the old wizard's brow hovered an expression of utter abandonment, like that of a man whose hours upon this earth are counted. The breathing was short and painful, and the dry lips and pinched nostrils almost gave to the face the aspect of a corpse.

In the corner the Indian was kneeling before a brass idol, pouring incense into a

brazier that burned at the base, and muttering prayers in an unknown tongue.

A strange shudder of apprehension ran through the visitors as they noted the preparations for the last hour. A sudden feeling of helpless terror made them tremble. He would die, and the secret with him!

"Ah, my children," he said, feebly, "it is well that you have come while some life still burns in this worn-out body. The light of the candle flickers in the socket before the breath of the destroyer."

"Oh, uncle," cried Nita, in a flood of tears, "you must not die, you shall not." And she knelt down at the foot of the bed and clasped one of the claw-like hands firmly, as if to hold him back from the unknown abyss. It seemed at that moment that the phantom of a smile wreathed the withered features of the old man as his eyes fell on the kneeling figure.

"Allah Achbar! God is great! There is but one God, and Mahomet is his prophet. Alahuma subahana hu! The will of God be

done!" he murmured, piously. And the Indian in the corner bowed his head toward the east, and struck his forehead three times, while he beat his breast despairingly.

"My children, I am sick unto death. Draw near to me, for my breath is faint and my voice is feeble. I would have you both see that the bequests in my will are properly bestowed. The bulk of my property I leave to the Society of Historical Research. The revenues of my tea-garden on the Hoang-ho you will pay in quarterly installments to my faithful servant Guzko."

Husband and wife heaved a dolorous sigh at this point, but it was occasioned probably by their melancholy surroundings and the presence of death.

"But I have not forgotten you," said the old man. "I bequeath to you my greatest treasures, that I have spent many long years in collecting."

"Ah!" murmured his nephew and niece.

"Yes," he continued. "Now that my last hours have come, let all past hostilities be

forgotten. I leave to you my priceless collection of petrified cats from the temples of Thebes.

"Oh!" exclaimed husband and wife, looking at each other blankly. "Oh!" they repeated.

"It is only just," said the sage. "Be not overcome with the magnitude of my gift. It is the greatest reparation I can take for your unselfish kindness toward me these two years past."

"Oh! thank you, uncle, thank you!" stammered Nita, feeling that she ought to say something at that juncture. "We shall cherish the cats for your sake."

"Yes," blurted out Arthur; "they will always remind us of you, dear uncle."

The old man looked up a little severely to see if there was any personal allusion intended in the last remark, but the speaker's face was calm and placid. Arthur, in fact, had been thinking very hard for the last few moments. He could not reconcile himself to the fact that Uncle Oliver was about to

die with their secret locked up in his breast. Something must be done. They could not resign him to the tomb without a desperate struggle. He must live—he should live, at least long enough to dissolve their odious bargain. After that it would not so much matter.

His resolution having been taken, he suddenly cried, gayly :

“Why do you talk of dying, Uncle? You have many happy years in store for you. We will pull you through, and in a few days, at the most, you will be as lively as ever.”

Uncle Oliver looked at him in consternation from beneath his bushy eyebrows.

“Let me die in peace,” he murmured “Allah Achbar. God is great. Let no one dispute His will. My end has come. So it is written in the book of fate.” And he turned his face to the wall.

But they were not going to let him off so easily ; too much depended on his living. What a terrible future they must face if he should pass away, and his secret with him !

Nita, too, seemed to grasp her husband's intention. Certainly it would never do to resign him as long as a breath remained in his body. They would fight with the grim destroyer over the body of the victim he would claim.

"Come, uncle," cried Arthur, "the battle is not half over. Be not faint-hearted; we will save you yet. The best doctors in the city shall be called to consultation."

"I won't have them!" roared the dying man, with astonishing vehemence for one who had seemed so exhausted a moment ago. "If you bring one in the house, I will take poison and hasten matters."

"Very well," said Arthur resignedly; "then we must doctor you ourselves. I know by the sound of your voice that you are many miles off from death's door."

The invalid groaned and buried his face in the pillows.

"Come, Nita, we must do all we can to save our poor uncle. Go and get that copy of 'the Household Doctor' that your mother

gave you. It is downstairs on my secretary. Courage, uncle; we will save you;" as she departed hastily on her errand.

"Go 'way and let me die," howled Uncle Oliver.

"Not if your loving relatives can help it," firmly. "We will outwit the gentleman on the white horse yet. Have no fear."

"Oh!" moaned the sufferer.

"First," said Arthur, resolutely, "You want more air. The room is charged with smoke."

Guzko had now finished his devotions, and had resumed his stolid position at the foot of the bed. Arthur turned to him and said hastily, "Guzko, we are going to save Lord Oliver. Will you help me?"

"Sahib, I swear it by the sacred arms of Vishnu," bowing solemnly.

"Guzko," cried the old man from the bed, "I forbid you. Obey me. I am still your master."

"If you would save his life, follow my instructions, or you will be responsible for

his death," said Arthur. "Pay no heed to his words. They are the ravings of delirium."

The servant nodded, and, placing his forefinger on his forehead, bowed as if he understood.

"Put out that smoking stuff!" cried Arthur, vigorously. "We must first clear the room of this incense;" and going to the windows he raised the curtains and opened them wide to the evening breeze.

"Oh!" howled the invalid, "I shall freeze to death. Would you kill me before my time? Go away and let me die in peace."

"Why, you are reviving already," said Arthur. "That is a good sign. Let me feel your pulse," rushing to the bed and taking the old man's wrist in his hand, much against the other's wishes.

"Ah, I thought so," looking at his watch, "a high fever. We must proceed to more heroic treatment. Guzko—"

"Sahib," rising from his kneeling posture where he had been extinguishing the fire on the altar before the idol.

"Prepare a bath, and then bring up all the ice there is in the refrigerator and put it in the tub. We must reduce this fever."

Again the sufferer broke out into groans and protestations; but they paid no attention, and Guzko departed hastily on his mission.

"Do not excite yourself," said Arthur, calmly, holding the struggling invalid; "it will only aggravate your fever. Ah! there you are," as Nita entered the room, her arms laden with books and bottles. "Uncle is already much better."

"I'm not; I'm worse," howled the dying man.

"The fever has mounted to his brain," said Arthur. "I am going to give him an iced bath to reduce it."

"I have always heard mother say that a mustard-plaster at the base of the brain was excellent to draw away the blood from the head. See how flushed he is."

And in truth Uncle Oliver's countenance was as red as a lobster with the exertion of screaming at his nephew.

“Yes, I think half-a-dozen mustard-plasters would be just the thing,” said Arthur, after a moment’s thought. “Three on the chest, two on the back of his neck, and—oh, yes, one on the top of the head. The time has come for the most heroic measures.”

“Oh, look at him!” cried Nita, as the sufferer began to struggle and scream at the thought of what was coming.

“I shall have to tie his hands. You see, he is crazed with delirium,” said Arthur, calmly; and he proceeded to tie the old man’s wrists together with a silk handkerchief in spite of Uncle Oliver’s profane protestations. Nita had meanwhile prepared the mustard-plasters and proceeded to decorate him with them. Arthur having threatened to put one over his mouth if he persisted in screaming, silence was finally restored; in fact the sick man was almost too much exhausted to do anything but groan.

“His face is still very much flushed,” said Nita, who had been consulting the medical book. “Let us begin right here on this

chapter on fevers, and work our way through ; by that means we shall be sure of hitting on the right remedy."

It required all Arthur's strength at this juncture from keeping Uncle Oliver from bounding out of bed ; but the young guardian was strong, and such a withered old man was like a toy in his hands.

"A very sensible idea, Nita. Let us begin at once."

"There are several ways of bleeding," referring to the book ; "but if we try them all at once we shall be sure to hit the right one."

"A very wise conclusion."

"I think if you bled him on the soles of his feet, on the chest, and put a dozen leeches on each temple, it will do for the present."

"Oh, why did I not die before you came in ? Unhappy man !" murmured the sufferer.

"Now, while you are getting your lancet ready—" said Nita.

"I suppose an ink-eraser will do just as well ?" asked Vaness.

"Oh, certainly; the only thing necessary is to have it sharp and make a deep incision, so that there will be a good flow of blood."

"I understand perfectly."

"Good-bye, uncle, for the present," said Nita, bending over him lovingly. "You will be well in a few days, thanks to our care. While Arthur is bleeding you I shall be preparing a nice tea that will make you sleep. It's made from my dear mother's own recipe, and has been handed down for many generations in our family. It doesn't smell nice, but then it is all the more certain to do you good. It contains pennyroyal, molasses, boiled onions, cloves, and—and—Dear me! have I forgotten what the compound was? Arthur—"

"Yes, my dear."

"Is there some kind of stuff with a Latin name beginning asa—assa."

"Assafoetida."

"Oh, yes, that must be it—assafoetida. Now keep quiet, dear uncle, until I return."

You are to take three pints every hour until well;" and she bounded away gayly on her mission of mercy.

"Arthur," gasped the uncle, feebly.

"Yes, yes," bending over him.

"Kill me before Nita gets back."

And he sank exhausted among the pillows.

But Arthur paid small attention to the old man's ravings. Having bled him in four or five places, and after Nita had forced him to swallow several quarts of her decoction, which had become burnt in the brewing, they ran him up and down the room for a half-hour, having read in the book that violent exercise was excellent to restore circulation.

Then, having plunged him in the bath of cracked ice, he was finally put back to bed more dead than alive.

"Now you can take a short nap," said Nita, "and you will find yourself much better. We will rouse you in half an hour, because too much sleep is not good in your feeble condition. You might fall into a comatose

state from which there will be no waking you. In a half-hour we will return and renew the treatment, because so far we have only gone a page in the chapter on fevers."

The uncle groaned and rolled his face toward the wall, too feeble to make any retort; while husband and wife went downstairs together, well satisfied with their work.

The excitement and worry of the last hour had exhausted Nita. She sank down on the sofa with a sigh of fatigue.

"I am afraid all of our efforts have been in vain," she murmured, plaintively. "He seems to be slowly sinking."

"And with him dies our secret," said her companion, with a groan.

"It is all your fault," said Nita. "If you had never brought him into the house, our lives would not now be bound by this terrible bargain. We could call our souls our own."

"But it was you," angrily, "who worried him into the ceremony of changing them. I was indifferent. You have only yourself to blame that you have made your life wretched,

and dragged me down as well. Think of the future before us. You have been well punished for your discontent with your lot.

But Nita was too choked with tears at that moment to make a reply.

"At least we have seen each other in our true lights," she said, after a moment's silence. "We understand each other better than ever before."

"Much good may that do us in the years to come! Better a life-time of ignorance than those few weeks that have given us knowledge."

"A nice ornament to the gentle sex you have made!" said Nita freezingly."

"A beautiful example of manhood you have displayed!" growled her companion. "But for you, this bargain in souls would never been brought about."

"Don't, don't!" cried Nita, in a flood of tears. "Don't try and make me feel more miserable than I am. If I have done wrong, let these tears show my deep repentance. This is no time for mutual recriminations.

We share a common danger. Let us declare a truce until Uncle Oliver's fate has been decided."

"Perhaps you are right; but oh!" with a pang of recollection, "if I could only have my beautiful life back again! Never would I murmur at fortune, if it were only restored."

"I deserve my fate," said Nita, with a fresh flood of tears, "I had everything to make life happy, but I was spoiled and discontented. The punishment is just, but it is hard, so hard to bear!" wringing her hands despairingly.

"Our repentance comes all too late." groaned Arthur. "We should have thought of this before we made that terrible bargain."

He paused in the midst of his lamentations at the sight of a strange apparition. Husband and wife shrieked at the sight; and indeed it was enough to appal the stoutest heart. It was Uncle Oliver, or his ghost—Uncle Oliver swathed in mustard-plasters, and his brow crowned with leeches. his feet

wrapped in numerous white cloths. He tottered to a chair and sank into it with a groan.

"How imprudent of you!" murmured Nita, rushing to his side. "Arthur, we must carry him back to his room."

"Never!" exclaimed the patriarch, smiting his beard. "Not until I have had my say. My children, I give in; you have conquered me. I have deceived you."

"Deceived us?"

"Yes, I am not sick—that is, I was not until you began to treat me, or rather maltreat me, for the fever," making a wry face. "The thought that Nita might arrive at any moment and force me to take another quart of her tea, or that Arthur would try to dissect me again with a dull pen-knife, decided me to demand a truce of hostilities while some life still remained in my poor old body."

"Explain," said the nephew; "you speak in riddles."

The old man cleared his throat and said:

"I feigned sickness to frighten you. I did not think you had been punished enough," directing his glance particularly towards Nita. "But you turned the tables on me completely, and almost made me wish that death would indeed come to my relief. What was intended only as a joke came near having a serious ending. Another day of such treatment and I should be ready for the last rites. I have come down here to propose a truce; to make a new bargain with you—to give you back your souls if in return I am permitted to live in peace the little while Allah permits me to remain on earth."

"Agreed," cried the husband and wife, almost in the same breath.

The sage smiled.

"Are you quite sure this time that you will not repent the exchange?"

"We have suffered enough," said Arthur. "Give us back our old lives, and we will never murmur at our lot again."

"I have spoken ill of you, uncle," cried Nita, kneeling at his feet. "I have said

cruel things that I now regret. I am well punished. I have learned a severe lesson during these weeks. Restore me to my old place and you will never have cause to regret it."

"This experience has not been in vain," said the sage. "Verily the mummy's secret was not without value. It has given you an insight into your own lives, and shown you how you had despised the most generous gifts of God. Let this lesson suffice. Be content to live out with un murmuring patience your several lives in that condition it has pleased the Creator to call you to, content to sup on honey and on rue, for love shall make the bitter sweet."

They kneeled like two penitents at his feet, thinking dreamily of the sweet hope held out to them by his words. And the sage drew from his sleeve the famous box and the tattered scroll; and, again, as on that fateful day, the lights flickered in the clouds of incense, and the pale blue flames danced above the stooping figures, and then

the mist of perfume floated away into thin air, and the patriarch, raising his hands towards heaven, murmured :

“Allah Achbar ! It is done.”

Nita opened her eyes with a glad cry. A great feeling of joy and rest came over her as she looked up into Arthur’s eyes brimmed with happy tears. Then, hiding her charming face in his bosom, she cried, “A—Arthur !”

“Darling !” pressing her lips.

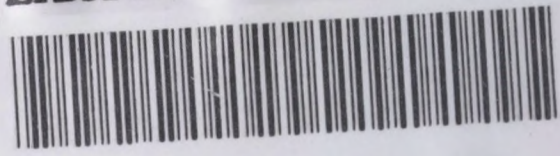
“I—I am so glad we are *us* again !”

THE END.





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